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PROVISIONAL APPLICATION COVER SHEET

This is a request for filing a PROVISIONAL APPLICATION under 37 CFR 1.53(c).

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TITLE OF THE INVENTION (280 characters max)

GAME OF CHANCE AND SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR PLAYING GAMES OF CHANCE

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS

CUSTOMER NUMBER:

23628

ENCLOSED APPLICATION PARTS (check all that apply)

☒ Specification - Number of Pages = 52

☒ Drawing(s) - Number of Sheets 8

☐ Application Data Sheet, See 37 CFR 1.76

☒ Return receipt postcard

The invention was made by an agency of the United States Government or under a contract with an agency of the United States Government.

☒ No

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METHOD OF PAYMENT (check all that apply)

☒ A check is enclosed to cover the Provisional Filing Fees.

☒ The Commissioner is hereby authorized to charge any additional fees or credit overpayment to Deposit Account 23/2825. A duplicate of this sheet is enclosed.

☒ Small Entity Status is claimed.

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GAME OF CHANCE AND SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR PLAYING GAMES OF
CHANCE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention relates to games of chance and methods of and systems for playing the games of chance.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RELATED ART

10 Numerous games are played legally as wagering games at casinos and other locales in the United States and around the world. The more popular wagering games include card games, tile games and other types of games. The more popular wagering card games include poker, blackjack (or twenty-one) and baccarat. Other wagering card games include cribbage, hearts, spades, euchre, canasta and bridge. Wagering tiles games include the many variations of dominoes and Asian tile games, including Tien Gow and Tiu U; a more complete but not
15 especially comprehensive list of tile games may be found at www.dominoes.com. Other wagering games include craps and backgammon. All but one of the games mentioned are games of skill and chance. That is, the game has an element of chance due to the randomness of the card order but skill or knowledge can be used to increase, sometimes dramatically, the odds that a player may win.

20 The popular wagering card game of blackjack is discussed below as an illustrative example of how a player may improve the chances of winning with some knowledge. In blackjack, a player plays against the dealer in getting as close without going over to twenty-one as possible. In blackjack, face cards are worth ten, aces are worth either one or eleven and others are face value. Players all play their own hands.

25 The players and the dealer are initially dealt two cards each; in turn, each player decides whether to take more cards or not depending upon what the player holds and the one card shown in the dealer's hand. A player may take as many cards as is necessary; however, if the player goes over twenty-one, the player automatically loses. The dealer follows the players in taking additional cards but can take additional cards only according to
30 predetermined rules. In some games, the dealer must always take a card unless he or she has

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seventeen or more points (hard 17). In another common variation, the dealer must take a card unless he or she has seventeen or more points except when seventeen is obtained by an ace being counted as eleven (soft 17).

5 A player has numerous options for playing a hand. Depending upon the rules of the gaming operator, the player can double, surrender, pay insurance, split, hit or stick. Double means to double the initial bet and take only one more card. Surrender means quit the hand and get back half the initial bet. Pay insurance means paying up to an additional fifty percent of the initial bet to protect against a dealer blackjack when the dealer shows an ace; if the dealer has blackjack, the player breaks even and if the dealer does not have blackjack, the
10 player loses the insurance bet and plays the hand. Split means that if a player has two same value cards, i.e., two eights, then the player may split the hand into two hands and place the equivalent of another initial bet on the new second hand; the player then plays the two hands separately. Hit means a player takes another card and stick means the player stops taking cards.

15 With all these options, a player can play and have poor odds of winning against the gaming operator. However, it is also possible to increase a player's odds of winning by following a set strategy. For a blackjack game with the criteria of two decks, hard 17, doubling any two cards, doubling after splitting and no surrender, a player can reduce the gaming operator advantage to 0.20% by following set rules for splitting, doubling, hitting and
20 sticking. An example strategy table for playing the described game of blackjack is shown in Table 1; the table shown is for when a player has the indicated hard totals, i.e., no ace worth eleven. Two other tables for soft totals and for doubling complete the strategy set for the described blackjack game. The website www.blackjackinfo.com can generate strategy tables for playing variations of blackjack. A player can increase the odds of winning even more by
25 additionally being able to remember what cards have been played from the deck (commonly known as card counting).

For the wagering games mentioned above and others, there are often numerous variations that can be played but in all cases, there is an ideal strategy to play for increasing the odds of winning as much as possible for the player(s). The best player strategy can often
30 be found in books and on the Internet; some electronic games also provide extensive hints as

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to how best to play a hand. However, the rules to follow for best play are often complicated and thus a casual player greatly increases the odds that the dealer, other players, or the gaming operator will win because of poor gaming skills.

Table 1

Player Hard Total Game Strategy

Player Total	Dealer Upcard									
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	T	A
17 and above	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
16	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
15	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
14	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
13	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
12	H	H	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
11	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
10	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	H	H
9	D	D	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
8 and below	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H

Key: H= Hit; S= Stand; D= Double

Table 2

Baccarat Rules for Drawing Third Card

Action	Initial Count of Own Hand	Third Card Drawn by Player
Player Draws	0 - 5	
Player Stands	6 - 9	
Dealer	0 - 2	0 - 9
Draws*	3	0 - 7, 9
	4	2 - 7
	5	4 - 7
	6	6 - 7

*Dealer does not draw third card if situation is not shown.

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Baccarat is the one wagering game mentioned above that is a game of chance. In the most common versions of baccarat, Punto Banco and Chemin de Fer, two cards are dealt to a player and the dealer each. The player plays against the dealer trying to get as close to nine points as possible. If either the player or the dealer has eight or nine points in the initial deal, then the game is over. A nine in the initial deal automatically wins unless tied by another nine; if there is no nine, an eight in the initial deal automatically wins unless tied by another eight. Face cards are worth zero, aces are one and others are face value; if the total value goes over nine, the tens digit is dropped. The player and dealer have rules that must be followed as to whether they are able to take a maximum of one more card or not; the rules are dependent upon the total of the first two cards being held by the player(s) or the dealer and for the dealer, the third card drawn by the player(s). The rules are outlined in Table 2.

In baccarat, up to only two players are dealt a hand along with the banker's (or dealer's) hand; all bettors including the players bet on whether either players' hands or both beat the banker's hand. The payoff for betting correctly is 1:1 plus a 5% commission paid to the house for winning by betting on the banker. A bettor can also bet that the player(s) and the dealer will tie; this typically pays 8:1. Because of the set rules for drawing a third card, the odds for winning by a player are thus fixed and therefore, baccarat is a game of chance, not one of skill. The typical odds of the banker or dealer winning are 1.06:1.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A need exists for wagering games where the player's skill does not become a factor that determines whether the player wins or not while the wagering games maintain an added element of suspense. Such games would increase player participation in wagering games and increase player satisfaction.

According to one aspect of the present invention, a game of chance is provided that is adapted from at least one game of skill and chance. The game of chance comprises a plurality of players, and a predetermined set of rules by which the plurality of players play the game of chance, wherein winners are automatically determined from the plurality of players. In one embodiment of the invention, one of the plurality of players is at least one of a dealer, the house, a gaming operator and a computer. In another embodiment of the invention, the

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winner is automatically chosen by the gaming operator. In another embodiment of the invention, payout to the winner is automatically made according to a predetermined payout table. In another embodiment of the invention, play of the game of chance is performed automatically by a computer. In another embodiment of the invention, at least one bet is
5 made according to a predetermined set of rules.

In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one bet is made automatically on behalf of at least one of the plurality of players. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one bet is made by a computer. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one bet is a non-initial bet. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one game of
10 skill and chance is a game having elements of skill and chance. In another embodiment of the invention, the element of skill is removed from the game. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is poker. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card stud. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card draw.
15 In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is blackjack. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is dominoes. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is backgammon.

In another embodiment of the invention, elements of skill are removed by prohibiting
20 a player to affect playing choices made throughout play of the game. In another embodiment of the invention, the winner is chosen by a computer controlled by the gaming operator. In another embodiment of the invention, additional bets are made according to a set of betting rules after the initial bet level is determined by at least one of the plurality of players. In another embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of players pays to play the
25 game with at least one of money and loyalty points.

In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one of the plurality of players pays by at least one of a group comprising cash, debit or credit card, account credit or loyalty program credit. In another embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of
30 players is allowed to create a subscription to play multiple games. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one of the plurality of players is allowed to automatically renew the

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subscription. In another embodiment of the invention, each of the plurality of players plays against a game operator.

In another embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of players does not need to observe the game to play. In another embodiment of the invention, each of the plurality of players may observe play of the game. In another embodiment of the invention, each of the plurality of players may observe play of the game on at least one of a group comprising a television, a personal computer, a kiosk, a handheld device, a telephone having a display, and in-person. In another embodiment of the invention, there is at least one progressive jackpot associated with the game. In another embodiment of the invention, payout for winning the game is by at least one of a group comprising money, credit, merchandise or loyalty points. In another embodiment of the invention, payout for winning money is by at least one of a group comprising cash, check, debit card, and account credit. In another embodiment of the invention, the payout for winning loyalty points is by at least one of loyalty program credit and account credit. In another embodiment of the invention, the game includes a plurality of game sessions, and wherein the plurality of game sessions run continually. In another embodiment of the invention, a gaming operator displays, to each of the plurality of players, at least one of a winning game and a winning player.

In another embodiment of the invention, the game is conducted using a computer system. In another embodiment of the invention, the computer system automatically notifies at least one of the plurality of players of a result of the game. In another embodiment of the invention, the computer system automatically notifies at least one of the plurality of players of their winnings. In another embodiment of the invention, the computer system notifies the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a kiosk. In another embodiment of the invention, the computer system notifies the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a kiosk. In another embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of players may access his or her results for past games. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one of the plurality of players may access his or her results for past games from a location remote to the computer system. In another embodiment

of the invention, the results for past games include at least one of a group including wins, payouts, and losses. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one player gains access through at least one of a kiosk, a phone, a handheld device, a television and a computer. In another embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of players is permitted to replay at least one past game. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one player gains remote access through at least one of a kiosk, a telephone having a display, a handheld device, a television and a computer. In another embodiment of the invention, a plurality of game sessions associated with the game run continually. In another embodiment of the invention, one or more advertising streams are displayed to at least one of the plurality of players during the game. In another embodiment of the invention, a plurality of advertising streams are displayed between at least two of the plurality of game sessions. In another embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of players is allowed to enter a game through an alternative method of entry (AMOE).

In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of making at least one bet according to a predetermined set of rules. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of making the at least one bet automatically on behalf of at least one of the plurality of players. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one bet is made by a computer. In another embodiment of the

invention, the at least one bet is a non-initial bet. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one game of skill and chance is a game having elements of skill and chance. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of removing the element of skill from the game. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is poker. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card stud. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card draw. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is blackjack. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is dominoes. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is backgammon. In another embodiment of the invention, the act of removing elements of skill comprises an act of prohibiting a player to affect playing choices made throughout play of the game.

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plurality of players may observe play of the game on at least one of a group including a television, a personal computer, a kiosk, a handheld device, a telephone having a display, and in-person.

In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of associating at least one progressive jackpot with the game. In another embodiment of the invention, payout for winning the game may be by at least one of a group comprising money, credit, merchandise or loyalty points. In another embodiment of the invention, payout for winning money is by at least one of a group comprising cash, check, debit card, and account credit. In another embodiment of the invention, the payout for winning loyalty points is by at least one of loyalty program credit and account credit. In another embodiment of the invention, the game includes a plurality of game sessions, and wherein the method further comprises an act of running the plurality of game sessions continually. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of displaying, to each of the plurality of players, at least one of a winning game and a winning player.

In another embodiment of the invention, the game is conducted using a computer system. In another embodiment of the invention, the computer system performs an act of automatically notifying at least one of the plurality of players of a result of the game. In another embodiment of the invention, the computer system performs an act of automatically notifying at least one of the plurality of players of their winnings. In another embodiment of the invention, the computer system performs an act of notifying the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a kiosk. In another embodiment of the invention, the computer system performs an act of notifying the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a kiosk. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to access his or her results for past games. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of permitting the at least one of the plurality of players to access his or her results for past games from a location remote to the computer system. In another

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embodiment of the invention, the results for past games include at least one of a group including wins, payouts, and losses.

In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one player gains access through at least one of a kiosk, a phone, a handheld device, a television and a computer. In another
5 embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of players is permitted to replay at least one past game. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one player gains remote access through at least one of a kiosk, a telephone having a display, a handheld device, a television and a computer. In another embodiment of the invention, a plurality of game sessions associated with the game run continually. In another embodiment of the invention,
10 one or more advertising streams are displayed to at least one of the plurality of players during the game. In another embodiment of the invention, one or more advertising streams are displayed between at least two of the plurality of game sessions. In another embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of players is allowed to enter a game through an alternative method of entry (AMOE).

15 According to another aspect of the present invention, a computer-readable medium is provided having computer-readable signals stored thereon that define instructions that, as a result of being executed by a computer, instruct the computer to perform a method for conducting a game of chance adapted from at least one game of skill and chance. The method comprises acts of providing entry of a plurality of players in the game of chance, providing a
20 predetermined set of rules by which the plurality of players play the game of chance, and automatically determining a winner from the plurality of players. In another embodiment of the invention, one of the plurality of players is at least one of a dealer, the house, a gaming operator and a computer. In another embodiment of the invention, the act of automatically determining a winner further comprises an act of automatically determining, by a gaming
25 operator, winners among the plurality of players. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of automatically determining a payout to the winner according to a predetermined payout table. In another embodiment of the invention, the method of conducting the game of chance is performed automatically by a computer. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of making at least
30 one bet according to a predetermined set of rules. In another embodiment of the invention,

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the method further comprises an act of making the at least one bet automatically on behalf of at least one of the plurality of players. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one bet is made by a computer. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one bet is a non-initial bet.

5 In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one game of skill and chance is a game having elements of skill and chance. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of removing the element of skill from the game. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is poker. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is five-
10 card stud. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card draw. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is blackjack. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is dominoes. In another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is backgammon. In another embodiment of the invention, the act of removing elements of skill comprises an act of prohibiting a player to affect playing
15 choices made throughout play of the game. In another embodiment of the invention, the act of choosing the winner is performed by a computer controlled by the gaming operator. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of making additional bets according to a set of betting rules after an initial bet level is determined by at
20 least one of the plurality of players. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to pay to play the game with at least one of money or loyalty points. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to pay by at least one of a group comprising cash, debit or credit card, account credit or loyalty
25 program credit. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to create a subscription to play multiple games. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of permitting the at least one of the plurality of players to automatically renew the subscription. In another embodiment of the invention, each of the plurality of players plays against a game
30 operator.

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In another embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of players does not need to observe the game to play. In another embodiment of the invention, each of the plurality of players may observe play of the game. In another embodiment of the invention, each of the plurality of players may observe play of the game on at least one of a group
5 including a television, a personal computer, a kiosk, a handheld device, a telephone having a display, and in-person. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of associating at least one progressive jackpot with the game. In another embodiment of the invention, payout for winning the game may be by at least one of a group comprising money, credit, merchandise or loyalty points. In another embodiment of the invention, payout
10 for winning money is by at least one of a group comprising cash, check, debit card, and account credit. In another embodiment of the invention, the payout for winning loyalty points is by at least one of loyalty program credit and account credit. In another embodiment of the invention, the game includes a plurality of game sessions, and wherein the method further comprises an act of running the plurality of game sessions continually. In another
15 embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of displaying, to each of the plurality of players, at least one of a winning game and a winning player.

In another embodiment of the invention, the game is conducted using a computer system. In another embodiment of the invention, the computer system performs an act of automatically notifying at least one of the plurality of players of a result of the game. In
20 another embodiment of the invention, the computer system performs an act of automatically notifying at least one of the plurality of players of their winnings. In another embodiment of the invention, the computer system performs an act of notifying the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a kiosk. In another embodiment of the
25 invention, the computer system performs an act of notifying the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a kiosk. In another embodiment of the invention, the method further comprises an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to access his or her results for past games. In another embodiment of the invention, the method
30 further comprises an act of permitting the at least one of the plurality of players to access his

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or her results for past games from a location remote to the computer system. In another embodiment of the invention, the results for past games include at least one of a group including wins, payouts, and losses. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one player gains access through at least one of a kiosk, a phone, a handheld device, a television
5 and a computer.

In another embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of players is permitted to replay at least one past game. In another embodiment of the invention, the at least one player gains remote access through at least one of a kiosk, a telephone having a display, a handheld device, a television and a computer. In another embodiment of the
10 invention, a plurality of game sessions associated with the game run continually. In another embodiment of the invention, one or more advertising streams are displayed to at least one of the plurality of players during the game. In another embodiment of the invention, one or more advertising streams are displayed between at least two of the plurality of game sessions. In another embodiment of the invention, at least one of the plurality of players is allowed to
15 enter a game through an alternative method of entry (AMOE).

According to another aspect of the present invention, a system is provided for playing a game of chance adapted from at least one game of skill and chance. The system comprises means for providing entry of a plurality of players in the game of chance, means for providing a predetermined set of rules by which the plurality of players play the game of chance, and
20 means for automatically determining a winner from the plurality of players. According to one embodiment of the invention, one of the plurality of players is at least one of a dealer, the house, a gaming operator and a computer. According to another embodiment of the invention, the means for automatically determining a winner further comprises means for automatically determining, by a gaming operator, winners among the plurality of players.
25 According to another embodiment of the invention, the system further comprises means for automatically determining a payout to the winner according to a predetermined payout table. According to another embodiment of the invention, the game of chance is conducted by a computer. According to another embodiment of the invention, the system further comprises means for making at least one bet according to a predetermined set of rules. According to
30 another embodiment of the invention, the system further comprises means for making the at

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least one bet automatically on behalf of at least one of the plurality of players. According to another embodiment of the invention, the at least one bet is made by a computer. According to another embodiment of the invention, the at least one bet is a non-initial bet.

According to another embodiment of the invention, the at least one game of skill and
5 chance is a game having elements of skill and chance. According to another embodiment of the invention, the system further comprises means for removing the element of skill from the game. According to another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is poker. According to another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card stud. According to another embodiment of the
10 invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card draw. According to another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is blackjack. According to another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is dominoes. According to another embodiment of the invention, the game having elements of skill and chance is backgammon. According to another embodiment of the invention, the means for removing elements of skill comprises means for prohibiting a
15 player to affect playing choices made throughout play of the game. According to another embodiment of the invention, the means for choosing the winner is performed by a computer controlled by the gaming operator. According to another embodiment of the invention, the system further comprises means for making additional bets according to a set of betting rules
20 after an initial bet level is determined by at least one of the plurality of players.

Other advantages, novel features, and objects of the invention will become apparent from the following detailed description of the invention when considered in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, which are schematic and which are not intended to be drawn to scale. In the figures, each identical or nearly identical component that is illustrated in various
25 figures is represented by a single numeral. For purposes of clarity, not every component is labeled in every figure, nor is every component of each embodiment of the invention shown where illustration is not necessary to allow those of ordinary skill in the art to understand the invention.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the drawings,

Figure 1 is an illustrative embodiment of a general-purpose computer system upon which games according to various aspects of the invention may be implemented;

5 Figure 2 is an illustrative embodiment of a computer data storage system that may be used to implement various aspects of the invention;

Figure 3 is a flow chart showing a process for playing a game according to one embodiment of the invention;

10 Figure 4 is a block diagram showing components of a game computer system according to one embodiment of the invention;

Figure 5 is a block diagram showing components of a game payment subsystem according to one embodiment of the invention;

Figure 6 is a block diagram showing components of a game payout subsystem according to one embodiment of the invention; and

15 Figure 7 is an illustrative embodiment of the major basic components of a game playing and viewing subsystem according to one embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

20 According to one aspect of the invention, wagering games of chance are provided that are adapted from traditional wagering games of skill and chance, such as blackjack, poker or dominoes, played electronically such that skill needed from a player is removed. In accordance with one aspect, the need for player skill may be removed by allowing a gaming device or computer to automatically play the game following a predetermined set of rules. By doing so, the games become wagering games of chance.

25 An important criterion for games that have skill involved is the requirement for a player decision to be made following the initial bet and/or card or game play. For instance, in backgammon, a player rolls two dice and must decide which chips to move and how to move them following rules of moving. In five-card draw poker, a player must decide which cards to keep and which to discard in return for getting new cards. In dominoes, a player must decide

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which tile to play and where. All of these requirements for a decision lead to a requirement of skill or knowledge to improve the player's chance of winning.

Unfortunately, most casinos and gaming operators greatly discourage a player from using strategy sheets and card counting. This means that the casual player does not have all the advantages of a professional player because the time (and, most importantly, additional skill) required to memorize the strategies may be great compared to the potential reward. Furthermore, prior to memorizing the optimal card playing strategy, the player must know the rules of the particular gaming operator so that the right strategy is memorized. Additionally, the card play may drastically slow down for a casual player using a strategy if the player has not practiced much in advance.

According to one aspect of the invention, it is realized that one method for resolving the player having to remember an ideal card playing strategy is to have the wagering game rules automatically determine the game play. As discussed above, baccarat employs rules to make it a pure game of chance. The advantage of baccarat is that the odds, payout and commission are fixed, the card play is pre-determined and the game proceeds quickly. Unfortunately, the disadvantages of baccarat are the payout, commission and odds lead to a bettor in most instances not being able to obtain a large winning over a number of games; the card play rules are complicated; and the card play has few options to allow suspense to enter into the game. Because of these reasons, baccarat is not a popular game.

According to various embodiments of the invention, games that ordinarily involve skill of a player are converted to games of chance. These games may be, for example, blackjack, poker, dominoes and other games of skill and chance. By eliminating skill involved in playing the game, the game becomes more accessible to others who are unfamiliar with the rules, and the game play becomes faster, as decision components by the player are removed. Also, because more popular traditional games of skill and chance may be used to create a game of chance, people already familiar with such games would more likely play. According to one embodiment of the invention, a game is provided that has fixed odds of winning created by following a set of rules for playing the game. These rules allow for the automatic play by, for example, a computer. Optionally, the computer may be adapted to perform betting on the game on behalf of a player. According to another embodiment of the

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invention, the games are traditional games of skill and chance that are converted to games of chance. These games may also be automatically played and/or betted by computer on behalf of a player.

Prior to a game, a game player may need to pay for playing. For example, a game
5 player may pay using money or loyalty points. In particular, a game player may pay using money by debit card, credit card, check, cash or from an account credit either with the gaming operator or an affiliated organization. Alternatively, a game player may pay using loyalty points from an account held either by the gaming operator or by an affiliated organization. Loyalty points may be obtained from any type of organization but are generally associated
10 with loyalty programs such as frequent flier programs for airlines, frequent stay programs for hotels or frequent visitor programs for casinos. The game player may pay in person using a cashier or through other remote means including telephone, handheld device, kiosk, computer through the Internet or other network and mail. Rather than a player paying a set amount per game, a player may instead open an account and place money or loyalty points in the account
15 as credit.

In one embodiment of the invention, players may subscribe to play multiple consecutive games. That is, the player pays at one time to play many consecutive games. The player may also choose to have his or her subscription automatically renewed. The player may also be able to manage his or her subscription including setting spending limits,
20 time-out periods or password protection.

According to one embodiment of the invention, players may also enter to play this or any other wagering game of chance using an alternative method of entry (AMOE). AMOE is a required available method of entry that does not require a purchase to enter a sweepstake; sweepstakes are usually used as a promotional or marketing tool. An individual entering a
25 sweepstakes by AMOE is required by law to have the same odds of winning each of the available prizes.

A common AMOE method is to have an individual interested in entering the sweepstakes send in a post card with his or her name, address or other contact information. Another AMOE method is to have an individual sign on to a free internet website and submit
30 the required information for free. Numerous other methods may be used for AMOE. Most

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sweepstakes limit the number of times one individual or family may enter a sweepstakes by AMOE.

According to one embodiment of the invention, it is realized that an AMOE (alternative method of entry) may be used to enter a game of chance. More particularly, it is possible to develop, implement and run wagering games of chance, including the inventive games described herein, with an AMOE method of entry as is usually associated with sweepstakes. An individual may enter the wagering game of chance by AMOE using the post card or the online method outlined above. The wagering game of chance player entering by AMOE may also have the same odds to win the payout associated with the game in which they are entered. The wagering game of chance player entering by AMOE may also be limited to a small number of games within a given period of time, for example one game in one year or two games in one month. Other numbers of games and given periods may be any number, and the invention is not limited to any particular implementation.

According to one embodiment, the game that the game player entering by AMOE is entered into may be determined by the game player on the AMOE entry form. For example, the post card AMOE may be required to state the date and the time of the game that the game player wants to enter. Alternatively, the game entered may be the next starting game after the AMOE is received and logged. As another alternative, AMOE entries may be assigned to a specific game(s) each hour, day, week or other time interval.

According to one embodiment, a game also has a predetermined payout table associated with it. The payout table may have a listing of the ways to obtain a payout and its payout ratio, that is the payout amount in relation to the amount wagered. For instance, if the payout ratio is 1.2: 1 then a winning \$1.00 bet will have a payout of \$1.20. The payout amount for each way to win may depend upon but may not be rigidly determined by the odds of obtaining the particular way to obtain a payout. The typical payout table may follow the standard payout schedule for playing the original wagering game of skill and chance. However, because the odds for winning are lowered for the gaming operator in this invention, the payout ratios may be adjusted for each way to win.

The payout table may also be affected as to whether the game is played against the gaming operator or against other players. Typically, if the player is playing against the

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gaming operator, then the payout table with the payout ratio discussed above is used. However, if the player is playing against other players, then the payout may be the total amount bet from all the players minus a predetermined commission due the gaming operator.

The payout table may also have adjustments for a player's subscription. For instance, the payout ratio may increase or the gaming operator commission may decrease if the player has a multiple game subscription, multiple card subscription, high payment per game card or any combination of the three. The payout may also be adjusted for numerous other criterion including frequent player credits. Of course, all payout adjustments must meet any legal requirements for the gaming jurisdiction in which the game is played.

The payout table for each game may also be supplemented by a jackpot that transfers from game to game. These types of jackpots are commonly called rolling or progressive jackpots. A rolling jackpot may be the same amount that transfers from game to game until it is paid out. A progressive jackpot is a rolling jackpot that increases as more games are played or according to some other criterion. Rolling or progressive jackpots are typically paid out for a difficult way to win, for example a royal flush in poker.

The final payout may also be affected by bonus play. Bonus play is well known in the gaming industry and works to increase some payouts by offering the chance to multiply a payout.

Once a player has paid or entered to play a game, the player may place an opening bet or the computer may place the bet for the player, if the player is placing a set bet per game. After the opening bet is placed, the game is played according to the rules of the game being played. Once the game is started, the game play and optionally the betting are partially or fully automated using one or more computer systems. Examples of such computer systems are more fully described below.

When a computer or gaming device plays a game automatically, the computer may determine the play according to rules predetermined for the game; these rules may be available for all players to see in advance. Preferably, the computer or gaming device determines the best play according to the rules for best play according to experts in the game. For example, the best strategy for playing blackjack may be found at www.blackjackinfo.com.

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The website first asks for the game variation, i.e., number of decks, soft or hard seventeen, and doubling and surrender options, and from that information generates tables for the best strategy for splitting pairs, doubling, hitting and standing. An example of part of the predetermined rules for game play for a variation of blackjack is shown in Table 1; the
5 electronic rules may also take into account the card count for determining whether a particular play will improve a player's odds of winning. Similar resources may be found for other wagering games of skill and chance.

With blackjack and possibly other games, the computer may also automatically bet for the player after the initial ante. In blackjack, the only possible additional bets in blackjack are
10 determined by the initial ante. These bets are split, double, insurance, and surrender. In traditional poker, the bets are typically more freeform but if the computer plays and bets the game for a player, then how the computer will bet may also be in the predetermined rules. Table 1 also shows how the rules for additional betting for blackjack may be incorporated.

The game player may view the game proceedings using television, wireless or line
15 telephone with display, handheld device, kiosk, computer or in person; depending upon the viewing medium, it may be necessary to download game information prior to viewing while other viewing medium may allow viewing of the streamed game information. For example, the game player may operate a computer that has an Internet-enabled interface (e.g., using Macromedia Flash or Java) and the computer may display streamed game information within
20 that interface. The game player may also decide not to watch.

The computer system may automatically determine when a player is a winner; such a result is automatically authenticated and verified by the computer system. In this instance, the computer system may then notify the game player that he or she has won and what the
25 winnings are after the computer has consulted the predetermined payout table described above. The notification of winning to a game player may occur by mail, e-mail, computer web or network, telephone, television, pager, fax, kiosk or any other means possible.

When the computer system automatically determines the winner and play is against other players, the computer system may also determine the game(s), hand(s) or board(s) and the associated player identity(ies) that hold the best chance of winning or is the best at the
30 moment during game play. The computer system may then display the game(s), hand(s) or

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board(s) or the identity of the game player(s) that is the best to all game players observing the game session. The computer system may also choose to display only one or a subset of all the best games, hand(s) or board(s) or the associated player identity(ies) to a particular game player observing the game session. Additionally when the game is completed, the computer system may display the winning game, hand or board, the winning player's identity or the payout.

During the period of time between the games, a game operator may make announcements, rest, or any number of actions. If the game is played using a computer system, then advertisements, sponsorships, public service announcements or any visual or auditory content may be inserted. The advertisements, etc. may also be inserted into the game display during a game.

When the computer automatically plays the games for the players, a game player may access information about the results of a game remotely after the game is completed. Remote access may be gained by kiosk, telephone, television, computer, handheld device or any other device that is appropriate. Information that may be accessed about a past game may include whether the player won or lost or what the player's payout was.

A game player may also be able to replay or review a past game using a video device including kiosk, telephone with display, television, computer or handheld device. By accessing the proper game in the computer system, a game player may be able to see a past game as it occurred, the winning game and winning game player identity(ies) or possibly any other aspect of the game of interest.

Preferably, the game play and betting are partially or fully automated using one or more computer systems. More preferably, the game play and betting are fully automated. A computer system may be a single computer that may be a supercomputer, minicomputer or a mainframe or personal computer. A computer system may also be any multiple and combination of computer types that work together; multiple computer systems may also be needed to run the whole game. The computer system also may include input or output devices, displays, or storage units.

A computer system to run the described game may have three component systems. One system may handle payment, subscription and/or AMOE by players to enter the games.

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Another system may handle playing and viewing the game and the third system may handle payouts. The game system may also be connected by direct line or network to other computer systems including systems for handling casino or hotel loyalty programs, reservations, in-room television viewing or gambling floor kiosks. Connections to other computer systems may be through any or all of the system components described below.

The payment system may be one or many of a number of well-known systems. For example, a player may be able to pay using a telephone by speaking with a call center representative that inputs player, payment and subscription information into a computer data structure using a user interface. As used herein, a "data structure" is an arrangement of data defined by computer-readable signals. These signals may be read by a computer system, stored on a medium associated with a computer system (e.g., in a memory, on a disk, etc.) and may be transmitted to one or more other computer systems over a communications medium such as, for example, a network. Also as used herein, a "user interface" or "UI" is an interface between a human user and a computer that enables communication between a user and a computer. Types of UIs include a graphical user interfaces (GUI), a display screen, a mouse, a keyboard, a keypad, a track ball, a microphone (e.g., to be used in conjunction with a voice recognition system), a speaker, a touch screen, a game controller (e.g., a joystick) etc, and any combinations thereof.

The player information that may be input includes name, address, telephone number and age. Payment information may include credit or debit card number or loyalty account information. Subscription information may include first game session date and time, number of game sessions to play, number of game pieces per game session and bet per game piece. Based upon the payment and subscription information, the call center representative would then verify that the payment information is valid and enough credit or funds is available for the player's desired subscription.

A similar system may exist for players entering using the mail or a post card AMOE except the call center may be replaced by a mail center with representatives entering information into a data structure using a user interface. A cashier, for example at a casino for players to pay cash to play, may also have the ability to input player, account and subscription information using a user interface.

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Computer systems or pay engines for handling electronic or online payment and subscriptions may also be used. Such systems are well-known including Paypal and those that run online subscription services like the Delphion intellectual property website or The Wall Street Journal Online. Using such a system, a player interacts directly with the user interface to input information into the payment data structure.

All the various pay systems and the various user interfaces may be on a network with the computer system(s) containing the player, account and subscription data structure(s). As used herein, a "network" or a "communications network" is a group of two or more devices interconnected by one or more segments of transmission media on which communications may be exchanged between the devices. Each segment may be any of a plurality of types of transmission media, including one or more electrical or optical wires or cables made of metal and/or optical fiber, air (e.g., using wireless transmission over carrier waves) or any combination of these transmission media.

The above are merely an illustrative embodiment of the pay system. Such an illustrative embodiment is not intended to limit the scope of the invention, as any of numerous other implementations of the pay system, for example, variations of online payment, are possible and are intended to fall within the scope of the invention. For example, the payment system may include using pay-per-view systems associated with interactive television or the pay engine may additionally deliver a receipt to the player by either e-mail or mail. None of the claims set forth below are intended to be limited to any particular implementation of the pay system unless such claim includes a limitation explicitly reciting a particular implementation.

Payout systems are also well-known. Any of a number of standard systems or payout engines for making payouts for winning may be used. For example, a standard application programming interface such as 'Quicken' (Intuit Inc., Mountain View, California, USA) may be used to write and mail checks or credit a debit card, credit card (if legal in the jurisdiction of play) or loyalty account. 'Quicken' may obtain the payout information by accessing a payout data structure across a network. As used herein, an "application programming interface" or "API" is a set of one or more computer-readable instructions that provide access to one or more other sets of computer-readable instructions that define functions, so that such

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functions can be configured to be executed on a computer in conjunction with an application program.

'Quicken' is merely an illustrative embodiment of the payout system. Such an illustrative embodiment is not intended to limit the scope of the invention, as any of numerous other implementations of the payout system, for example, variations of online payout, are possible and are intended to fall within the scope of the invention. Additionally, a cashier may also have access to payout information using a user interface to the payout data structure through a network; the cashier then makes a payment to the winning player based upon the accessed information. None of the claims set forth below are intended to be limited to any particular implementation of the pay system unless such claim includes a limitation explicitly reciting a particular implementation.

The game playing and viewing system may comprise of a number of components for performing specific functions. The components may include storage means for data structures for storing game variations, present game information, game history and win history and components to access the payment and payout data structures.

Although the systems and methods described below are described primarily in relation to playing blackjack, the systems and methods described herein are not limited thereto, but may be applied to other wagering games, for example, poker, dominoes or backgammon.

The game playing and viewing system would also have a game engine. The game engine may perform functions according to process 322 as shown in Figure 3a. Using Figure 3a as a guide, a game may proceed as such for a player that has chosen to play blackjack without a surrender option. At step 300, the player pays, enters or subscribes to play a game and at step 302 decides to play blackjack (without a surrender option). After possibly accessing the game variations data structure to pull up payout table and game play, game and/or betting rules, the computer then deals the initial hands to the player and the dealer at step 304; the two cards are face up for the player and one face up and one face down for the dealer. Next at step 306, the computer proceeds to play and bet the player's hand.

Figure 3b further illustrates the steps that may be taken by a computer system for playing the player's hand. According to one embodiment, the computer plays the hand according to the predetermined game play rules after reviewing the player's cards and the

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dealer's up card. The computer then proceeds through the play options of and if appropriate play and betting for insurance, splitting cards, doubling or hitting. A hand that does none of the mentioned options stands. Similar steps, e.g., steps 332, 336 and 344 that have a computer deduct additional bet from a player's account, may be performed using the same
5 program procedure. Step 340 may have the each of the two separate hands after splitting proceed through the steps shown in 324 starting at the beginning at 326.

Step 306 described in detail as 324 is merely an illustrative embodiment of the computer playing a player's hand. Such an illustrative embodiment is not intended to limit the scope of the invention, as any of numerous other implementations of the steps the
10 computer employs to play a player's hand are possible and are intended to fall within the scope of the invention. For example, the order of steps 330, 334, 343 and 350 may be different or the decision to split, double, hit or stand may be made at one time. None of the claims set forth below are intended to be limited to any particular implementation of the computer playing a player's hand unless such claim includes a limitation explicitly reciting a
15 particular implementation.

After playing the player's hand, the computer then determines if the player's hand busted (exceeds twenty one points) at step 308. If the hand did not bust, then the computer may play the dealer's hand at step 312 following the rules of the blackjack variation being played. After playing the dealer's hand, the computer may then determine whether the player
20 won (320), tied (318) or lost (310). If the player won, then the computer may proceed to notify the player that he or she is a winner as well as possibly determine the payout and notify the player also of such. The computer may also display the winning hand and/or player information to all game players. Winning player information that may be displayed includes name, city, state and country. It may also be possible that winners or winning hands may be
25 selectively displayed to game players. For instance, a player in Bismarck, North Dakota may be shown only the winning player information or hand that occurs geographically close to him or her, say in Pierre, South Dakota versus Boston, Massachusetts.

If the player ties the dealer, then the computer may return the player's bet, congratulate the player, thank the player for playing, invite the player to play again or any
30 number of actions.

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If the hand lost or busted, then the player is not a winner and the computer takes the player's bet; the computer may also notify the player that the hand is not a winner, thank the player for playing or invite the player to play again or any number of actions.

The game play process 322 may include additional acts. Further, the order of the acts performed as part of process 322 is not limited to the order illustrated in Figure 3a as the acts may be performed in other orders, and one or more of the acts of process 322 may be performed in series or in parallel to one or more other acts, or parts thereof. For example, acts 308 and 313, or parts thereof, may be performed in parallel.

Process 322 is merely an illustrative embodiment of the method of game play for a game engine. Such an illustrative embodiment is not intended to limit the scope of the invention, as any of numerous other implementations of the method of game play for a game engine. Variations of process 322 are possible and are intended to fall within the scope of the invention; for example, the computer system may request the player's approval prior to deducting a bet from a player's account. None of the claims set forth below are intended to be limited to any particular implementation of the method of game play for a game engine, unless such claim includes a limitation explicitly reciting a particular implementation.

Process 322, acts thereof and various embodiments and variations of these methods and acts, individually or in combination, may be defined by computer-readable signals tangibly embodied on a computer-readable medium, for example, a non-volatile recording medium, an integrated circuit memory element, or a combination thereof. Such signals may define instructions, for example, as part of one or more programs, that, as a result of being executed by a computer, instruct the computer to perform one or more of the methods or acts described herein, and/or various embodiments, variations and combinations thereof. Such instructions may be written in any of a plurality of programming languages, for example, Java, Visual Basic, C, C#, or C++, Fortran, Pascal, Eiffel, Basic, COBOL, etc., or any of a variety of combinations thereof. The computer-readable medium on which such instructions are stored may reside on one or more of the components of a general-purpose computer described above, and may be distributed across one or more of such components.

The computer-readable medium may be transportable such that the instructions stored thereon can be loaded onto any computer system resource to implement the aspects of the

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present invention discussed herein. In addition, it should be appreciated that the instructions stored on the computer-readable medium, described above, are not limited to instructions embodied as part of an application program running on a host computer. Rather, the instructions may be embodied as any type of computer code (e.g., software or microcode) that can be employed to program a processor to implement the above-discussed aspects of the present invention.

It should be appreciated that any single component or collection of multiple components of a computer system, for example, the computer system described below in relation to Figure 1, that perform the functions described above with respect to describe or reference the method can be generically considered as one or more controllers that control the above-discussed functions. The one or more controllers can be implemented in numerous ways, such as with dedicated hardware, or using a processor that is programmed using microcode or software to perform the functions recited above.

Another component of the game playing and viewing system may be a driver that streams video via a broadband, satellite or wireless medium to a user interface. If the game is played completely automatically, the user interface may be merely a video terminal including television with no user input means. Viewing access may be controlled by standard means for conditional access including using set top box addresses, telephone numbers or Internet protocol (IP) addresses.

The above is merely an illustrative embodiment of a game playing and viewing system. Such an illustrative embodiment is not intended to limit the scope of the invention, as any of numerous other implementations of a game playing and viewing system, for example, variations of conditional access, are possible and are intended to fall within the scope of the invention. None of the claims set forth below are intended to be limited to any particular implementation of a game playing and viewing system unless such claim includes a limitation explicitly reciting a particular implementation.

System 400, and components thereof such as the payment, payout and game engines, may be implemented using software (e.g., C, C#, C++, Java, or a combination thereof), hardware (e.g., one or more application-specific integrated circuits), firmware (e.g., electrically-programmed memory) or any combination thereof. One or more of the

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components of 400 may reside on a single system (e.g., the payment subsystem), or one or more components may reside on separate, discrete systems. Further, each component may be distributed across multiple systems, and one or more of the systems may be interconnected.

Further, on each of the one or more systems that include one or more components of
5 400, each of the components may reside in one or more locations on the system. For example, different portions of the components of 400 may reside in different areas of memory (e.g., RAM, ROM, disk, etc.) on the system. Each of such one or more systems may include, among other components, a plurality of known components such as one or more processors, a memory system, a disk storage system, one or more network interfaces, and one or more
10 busses or other internal communication links interconnecting the various components.

System 400 may be implemented on a computer system described below in relation to Figures 1 and 2.

System 400 is merely an illustrative embodiment of the game system. Such an illustrative embodiment is not intended to limit the scope of the invention, as any of numerous
15 other implementations of the game system, for example, variations of 400, are possible and are intended to fall within the scope of the invention. For example, a parallel system for viewing by interactive television may add additional video streamers specific for interactive television. None of the claims set forth below are intended to be limited to any particular implementation of the game system unless such claim includes a limitation explicitly reciting
20 a particular implementation.

Various embodiments according to the invention may be implemented on one or more computer systems. These computer systems may be, for example, general-purpose computers such as those based on Intel PENTIUM-type processor, Motorola PowerPC, Sun
UltraSPARC, Hewlett-Packard PA-RISC processors, or any other type of processor. It should
25 be appreciated that one or more of any type computer system may be used to partially or fully automate play of the described game according to various embodiments of the invention. Further, the software design system may be located on a single computer or may be distributed among a plurality of computers attached by a communications network.

A general-purpose computer system according to one embodiment of the invention is
30 configured to perform any of the described game functions including but not limited to player

completed. A variety of mechanisms are known for managing data movement between the medium 201 and the integrated circuit memory element 104, 202, and the invention is not limited thereto. The invention is not limited to a particular memory system 104 or storage system 106.

10 Although computer system 100 is shown by way of example as one type of computer system upon which various aspects of the invention may be practiced, it should be appreciated that aspects of the invention are not limited to being implemented on the computer system as shown in Figure 1. Various aspects of the invention may be practiced on one or more computers having a different architecture or components that that shown in Figure 1.

The processor and operating system together define a computer platform for which application programs in high-level programming languages are written. It should be understood that the invention is not limited to a particular computer system platform, processor, operating system, or network. Also, it should be apparent to those skilled in the art that the present invention is not limited to a specific programming language or computer

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system. Further, it should be appreciated that other appropriate programming languages and other appropriate computer systems could also be used.

One or more portions of the computer system may be distributed across one or more computer systems (not shown) coupled to a communications network. These computer
5 systems also may be general-purpose computer systems. For example, various aspects of the invention may be distributed among one or more computer systems configured to provide a service (e.g., servers) to one or more client computers, or to perform an overall task as part of a distributed system. For example, various aspects of the invention may be performed on a client-server system that includes components distributed among one or more server systems
10 that perform various functions according to various embodiments of the invention. These components may be executable, intermediate (e.g., IL) or interpreted (e.g., Java) code which communicate over a communication network (e.g., the Internet) using a communication protocol (e.g., TCP/IP).

It should be appreciated that the invention is not limited to executing on any particular
15 system or group of systems. Also, it should be appreciated that the invention is not limited to any particular distributed architecture, network, or communication protocol.

Various embodiments of the present invention may be programmed using an object-oriented programming language, such as SmallTalk, Java, C++, Ada, or C# (C-Sharp). Other object-oriented programming languages may also be used. Alternatively, functional,
20 scripting, and/or logical programming languages may be used. Various aspects of the invention may be implemented in a non-programmed environment (e.g., documents created in HTML, XML or other format that, when viewed in a window of a browser program, render aspects of a graphical-user interface (GUI) or perform other functions). Various aspects of the invention may be implemented as programmed or non-programmed elements, or any
25 combination thereof.

Having now described some illustrative embodiments of the invention, it should be apparent to those skilled in the art that the foregoing is merely illustrative and not limiting, having been presented by way of example only. Numerous modifications and other illustrative embodiments are within the scope of one of ordinary skill in the art and are
30 contemplated as falling within the scope of the invention. In particular, although many of the

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examples presented herein involve specific combinations of method acts or system elements, it should be understood that those acts and those elements may be combined in other ways to accomplish the same objectives. Acts, elements and features discussed only in connection with one embodiment are not intended to be excluded from a similar role in other

5 embodiments. Further, for the one or more means-plus-function limitations recited in the following claims, the means are not intended to be limited to the means disclosed herein for performing the recited function, but are intended to cover in scope any means, known now or later developed, for performing the recited function.

As used herein, whether in the written description or the claims, the terms

10 “comprising”, “including”, “carrying”, “having”, “containing”, “involving”, and the like are to be understood to be open-ended, i.e., to mean including but not limited to. Only the transitional phrases “consisting of” and “consisting essentially of”, respectively, shall be closed or semi-closed transitional phrases, as set forth, with respect to claims, in the United States Patent Office Manual of Patent Examining Procedures (Original Eighth Edition,

15 August 2001), Section 2111.03.

Use of ordinal terms such as “first”, “second”, “third”, etc., in the claims to modify a claim element does not by itself connote any priority, precedence, or order of one claim element over another or the temporal order in which acts of a method are performed, but are used merely as labels to distinguish one claim element having a certain name from another

20 element having a same name (but for use of the ordinal term) to distinguish the claim elements.

What is claimed is:

CLAIMS

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10. The game according to claim 1, wherein the at least one game of skill and chance is a game having elements of skill and chance.
11. The game according to claim 10, wherein the element of skill is removed from the
5 game.
12. The game according to claim 10, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is poker.
- 10 13. The game according to claim 12, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card stud.
14. The game according to claim 12, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card draw.
15
15. The game according to claim 10, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is blackjack.
16. The game according to claim 10, wherein the game having elements of skill and
20 chance is dominoes.
17. The game according to claim 10, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is backgammon.
- 25 18. The game according to claim 11, wherein elements of skill are removed by prohibiting a player to affect playing choices made throughout play of the game.
19. The game according to claim 3, wherein the winner is chosen by a computer controlled by the gaming operator.
30

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20. The game according to claim 1, wherein additional bets are made according to a set of betting rules after the initial bet level is determined by at least one of the plurality of players.

21. The game according to claim 1, wherein at least one of the plurality of players pays to
5 play the game with at least one of money and loyalty points.

22. The game according to claim 21, wherein the at least one of the plurality of players
pays by at least one of a group comprising cash, debit or credit card, account credit or loyalty
program credit.

10

23. The game according to claim 1, wherein at least one of the plurality of players is
allowed to create a subscription to play multiple games.

24. The game according to claim 23, wherein the at least one of the plurality of players is
15 allowed to automatically renew the subscription.

25. The game according to claim 1, wherein each of the plurality of players plays against a
game operator.

20 26. The game according to claim 1, wherein at least one of the plurality of players does
not need to observe the game to play.

27. The game according to claim 1, wherein each of the plurality of players may observe
play of the game.

25

28. The game according to claim 27, wherein each of the plurality of players may observe
play of the game on at least one of a group comprising a television, a personal computer, a
kiosk, a handheld device, a telephone having a display, and in-person.

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29. The game according to claim 1, wherein there is at least one progressive jackpot associated with the game.

30. The game according to claim 1, wherein payout for winning the game is by at least
5 one of a group comprising money, credit, merchandise or loyalty points.

31. The game according to claim 4, wherein payout for winning money is by at least one of a group comprising cash, check, debit card, and account credit.

10 32. The game according to claim 4, wherein the payout for winning loyalty points is by at least one of loyalty program credit and account credit.

33. The game according to claim 1, wherein the game includes a plurality of game sessions, and wherein the plurality of game sessions run continually.

34. The game according to claim 1, wherein a gaming operator displays, to each of the plurality of players, at least one of a winning game and a winning player.

35. The game according to claim 1, wherein the game is conducted using a computer
20 system.

36. The game according to claim 35, wherein the computer system automatically notifies at least one of the plurality of players of a result of the game.

25 37. The game according to claim 35, wherein the computer system automatically notifies at least one of the plurality of players of their winnings.

38. The game according to claim 36, wherein the computer system notifies the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, 30 mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a kiosk.

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39. The game according to claim 37, wherein the computer system notifies the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a kiosk.

5

40. The game according to claim 1, wherein at least one of the plurality of players may access his or her results for past games.

41. The game according to claim 35, wherein the at least one of the plurality of players
10 may access his or her results for past games from a location remote to the computer system.

42. The game according to claim 40, wherein the results for past games include at least one of a group including wins, payouts, and losses.

43. The game according to claim 41, wherein the at least one player gains access through
15 at least one of a kiosk, a phone, a handheld device, a television and a computer.

44. The game according to claim 1, wherein at least one of the plurality of players is permitted to replay at least one past game.

20

45. The game according to claim 34, wherein the at least one player gains remote access through at least one of a kiosk, a telephone having a display, a handheld device, a television and a computer.

46. The game according to claim 1, wherein a plurality of game sessions associated with
25 the game run continually.

47. The game according to claim 45, wherein one or more advertising streams are displayed to at least one of the plurality of players during the game.

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48. The game according to claim 46, wherein a plurality of advertising streams are displayed between at least two of the plurality of game sessions.

49. The game according to claim 1, wherein at least one of the plurality of players is
5 allowed to enter a game through an alternative method of entry (AMOE).

50. A method for conducting a game of chance adapted from at least one game of skill and chance, the method comprising acts of:
providing entry of a plurality of players in the game of chance;
10 providing a predetermined set of rules by which the plurality of players play the game of chance; and
automatically determining a winner from the plurality of players.

51. The method according to claim 50, wherein one of the plurality of players is at least
15 one of a dealer, the house, a gaming operator and a computer.

52. The method according to claim 50, wherein the act of automatically determining a winner further comprises an act of automatically determining, by a gaming operator, winners among the plurality of players.

20

53. The method according to claim 50, further comprising an act of automatically determining a payout to the winner according to a predetermined payout table.

54. The method according to claim 50, wherein the method of conducting the game of
25 chance is performed automatically by a computer.

55. The method according to claim 50, further comprising an act of making at least one bet according to a predetermined set of rules.

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56. The method according to claim 55, further comprising an act of making the at least one bet automatically on behalf of at least one of the plurality of players.

57. The method according to claim 56, wherein the at least one bet is made by a computer.

58. The method according to claim 56, wherein the at least one bet is a non-initial bet.

59. The method according to claim 50, wherein the at least one game of skill and chance is a game having elements of skill and chance.

60. The method according to claim 59, further comprising an act of removing the element of skill from the game.

61. The method according to claim 59, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is poker.

62. The method according to claim 61, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card stud.

63. The method according to claim 61, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card draw.

64. The method according to claim 61, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is blackjack.

65. The method according to claim 59, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is dominoes.

66. The method according to claim 59, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is backgammon.

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67. The method according to claim 60, wherein the act of removing elements of skill comprises an act of prohibiting a player to affect playing choices made throughout play of the game.

5

68. The method according to claim 52, wherein the act of choosing the winner is performed by a computer controlled by the gaming operator.

69. The method according to claim 50, further comprising an act of making additional bets according to a set of betting rules after an initial bet level is determined by at least one of the plurality of players.

10

70. The method according to claim 50, further comprising an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to pay to play the game with at least one of money or loyalty points.

15

71. The method according to claim 70, further comprising an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to pay by at least one of a group comprising cash, debit or credit card, account credit or loyalty program credit.

72. The method according to claim 50, further comprising an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to create a subscription to play multiple games.

20

73. The method according to claim 72, further comprising an act of permitting the at least one of the plurality of players to automatically renew the subscription.

25

74. The method according to claim 59, wherein each of the plurality of players plays against a game operator.

75. The method according to claim 59, wherein at least one of the plurality of players does not need to observe the game to play.

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76. The method according to claim 50, wherein each of the plurality of players may observe play of the game.

5 77. The method according to claim 76, wherein each of the plurality of players may observe play of the game on at least one of a group including a television, a personal computer, a kiosk, a handheld device, a telephone having a display, and in-person.

78. The method according to claim 50, further comprising an act of associating at least
10 one progressive jackpot with the game.

79. The method according to claim 50, wherein payout for winning the game may be by at least one of a group comprising money, credit, merchandise or loyalty points.

15 80. The method according to claim 53, wherein payout for winning money is by at least one of a group comprising cash, check, debit card, and account credit.

81. The method according to claim 53, wherein the payout for winning loyalty points is by at least one of loyalty program credit and account credit.

20

82. The method according to claim 50, wherein the game includes a plurality of game sessions, and wherein the method further comprises an act of running the plurality of game sessions continually.

25 83. The method according to claim 50, further comprising an act of displaying, to each of the plurality of players, at least one of a winning game and a winning player.

84. The method according to claim 50, wherein the game is conducted using a computer system.

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85. The method according to claim 84, wherein the computer system performs an act of automatically notifying at least one of the plurality of players of a result of the game.

86. The method according to claim 84, wherein the computer system performs an act of
5 automatically notifying at least one of the plurality of players of their winnings.

87. The method according to claim 85, wherein the computer system performs an act of notifying the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a
10 kiosk.

88. The method according to claim 86, wherein the computer system performs an act of notifying the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a
15 kiosk.

89. The method according to claim 50, further comprising an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to access his or her results for past games.

20 90. The method according to claim 84, further comprising an act of permitting the at least one of the plurality of players to access his or her results for past games from a location remote to the computer system.

91. The method according to claim 89, wherein the results for past games include at least
25 one of a group including wins, payouts, and losses.

92. The method according to claim 90, wherein the at least one player gains access through at least one of a kiosk, a phone, a handheld device, a television and a computer.

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93. The method according to claim 50, wherein at least one of the plurality of players is permitted to replay at least one past game.

94. The method according to claim 83, wherein the at least one player gains remote access
5 through at least one of a kiosk, a telephone having a display, a handheld device, a television
and a computer.

95. The method according to claim 50, wherein a plurality of game sessions associated with the game run continually.

10

96. The method according to claim 95, wherein one or more advertising streams are displayed to at least one of the plurality of players during the game.

97. The method according to claim 95, wherein one or more advertising streams are
15 displayed between at least two of the plurality of game sessions.

98. The method according to claim 50, wherein at least one of the plurality of players is allowed to enter a game through an alternative method of entry' (AMOE).

20 99. A computer-readable medium having computer-readable signals stored thereon that define instructions that, as a result of being executed by a computer, instruct the computer to perform a method for conducting a game of chance adapted from at least one game of skill and chance, the method comprising acts of:

providing entry of a plurality of players in the game of chance;
25 providing a predetermined set of rules by which the plurality of players play the game
of chance; and
automatically determining a winner from the plurality of players.

100. The computer-readable medium according to claim 99, wherein one of the plurality of
30 players is at least one of a dealer, the house, a gaming operator and a computer.

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50

- 45 -

110. The computer-readable medium according to claim 108, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is poker.

5 111. The computer-readable medium according to claim 110, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card stud.

112. The computer-readable medium according to claim 110, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card draw.

10

113. The computer-readable medium according to claim 110, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is blackjack.

114. The computer-readable medium according to claim 108, wherein the game having
15 elements of skill and chance is dominoes.

115. The computer-readable medium according to claim 108, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is backgammon.

20 116. The computer-readable medium according to claim 109, wherein the act of removing elements of skill comprises an act of prohibiting a player to affect playing choices made throughout play of the game.

117. The computer-readable medium according to claim 101, wherein the act of choosing
25 the winner is performed by a computer controlled by the gaming operator.

118. The computer-readable medium according to claim 99, wherein the method further comprises an act of making additional bets according to a set of betting rules after an initial bet level is determined by at least one of the plurality of players.

30

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119. The computer-readable medium according to claim 99, wherein the method further comprises an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to pay to play the game with at least one of money or loyalty points.

5 120. The computer-readable medium according to claim 119, wherein the method further comprises an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to pay by at least one of a group comprising cash, debit or credit card, account credit or loyalty program credit.

10 121. The computer-readable medium according to claim 99, wherein the method further comprises an act of permitting at least one of the plurality of players to create a subscription to play multiple games.

122. The computer-readable medium according to claim 121, wherein the method further comprises an act of permitting the at least one of the plurality of players to automatically
15 renew the subscription.

123. The computer-readable medium according to claim 108, wherein each of the plurality of players plays against a game operator.

20 124. The computer-readable medium according to claim 108, wherein at least one of the plurality of players does not need to observe the game to play.

125. The computer-readable medium according to claim 99, wherein each of the plurality of players may observe play of the game.

25 126. The computer-readable medium according to claim 125, wherein each of the plurality of players may observe play of the game on at least one of a group including a television, a personal computer, a kiosk, a handheld device, a telephone having a display, and in-person.

135. The computer-readable medium according to claim 133, wherein the computer system performs an act of automatically notifying at least one of the plurality of players of their winnings.

10 137. The computer-readable medium according to claim 135, wherein the computer system performs an act of notifying the at least one of the plurality of players by at least one of a group comprising a telephone, a pager, fax, mail, a television, a personal computer, a handheld device and a kiosk.

139. The computer-readable medium according to claim 133, wherein the method further
20 comprises an act of permitting the at least one of the plurality of players to access his or her
results for past games from a location remote to the computer system.

25

141. The computer-readable medium according to claim 139, wherein the at least one player gains access through at least one of a kiosk, a phone, a handheld device, a television and a computer.

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150. The system according to claim 148, wherein the means for automatically determining a winner further comprises means for automatically determining, by a gaming operator, winners among the plurality of players.
- 5 151. The system according to claim 148, further comprising means for automatically determining a payout to the winner according to a predetermined payout table.
152. The system according to claim 148, wherein the game of chance is conducted by a computer.
- 10 153. The system according to claim 148, further comprising means for making at least one bet according to a predetermined set of rules.
154. The system according to claim 153, further comprising means for making the at least one bet automatically on behalf of at least one of the plurality of players.
- 15 155. The system according to claim 154, wherein the at least one bet is made by a computer.
- 20 156. The system according to claim 154, wherein the at least one bet is a non-initial bet.
157. The system according to claim 148, wherein the at least one game of skill and chance is a game having elements of skill and chance.
- 25 158. The system according to claim 157, further comprising means for removing the element of skill from the game.
159. The system according to claim 157, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is poker.
- 30

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160. The system according to claim 159, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is five-card stud.

161. The system according to claim 159, wherein the game having elements of skill and
5 chance is five-card draw.

162. The system according to claim 159, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is blackjack.

10 163. The system according to claim 157, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is dominoes.

164. The system according to claim 157, wherein the game having elements of skill and chance is backgammon.

15

165. The system according to claim 158, wherein means for removing elements of skill comprises means for prohibiting a player to affect playing choices made throughout play of the game.

20 166. The system according to claim 150, wherein the means for choosing the winner is performed by a computer controlled by the gaming operator.

167. The system according to claim 150, further comprising means for making additional bets according to a set of betting rules after an initial bet level is determined by at least one of
25 the plurality of players.

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ABSTRACT

A new game of chance in which a wagering game of skill and chance is played electronically automatically according to a predetermined set of rules. Possible games include card games, such as poker and blackjack, or other games, such as dominoes, craps or
5 backgammon.

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GAME OF CHANCE AND SYSTEM AND
METHOD FOR PLAYING GAMES OF CHANCE

by: Mark E. Herrmann, et al.

Attorney Docket No.: R00586.70002

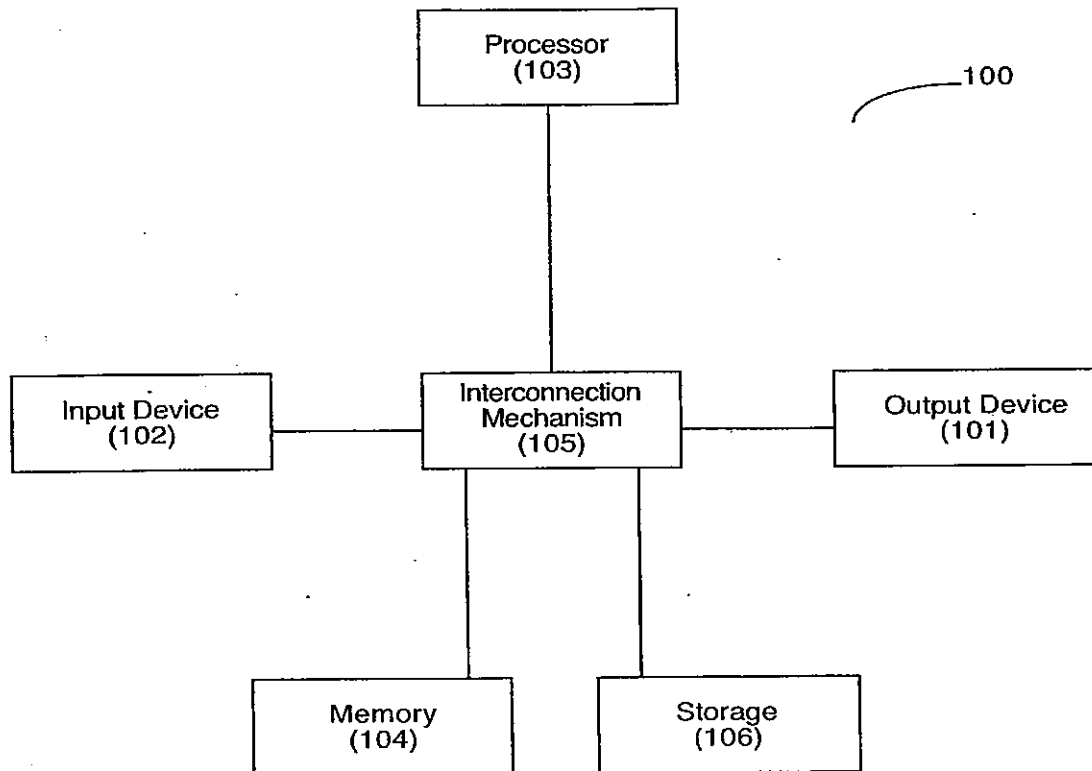


Figure 1

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GAME OF CHANCE AND SYSTEM AND
METHOD FOR PLAYING GAMES OF CHANCE

by: Mark E. Herrmann, et al.

Attorney Docket No.: R00586.70002

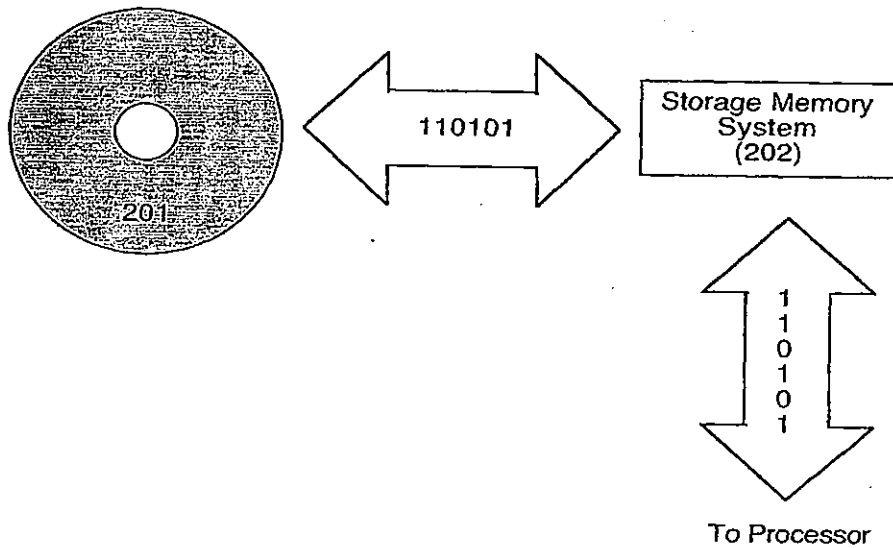


Figure 2

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 GAME OF CHANCE AND SYSTEM AND
 METHOD FOR PLAYING GAMES OF CHANCE
 by: Mark E. Herrmann, et al.
 Attorney Docket No.: R00586.70002

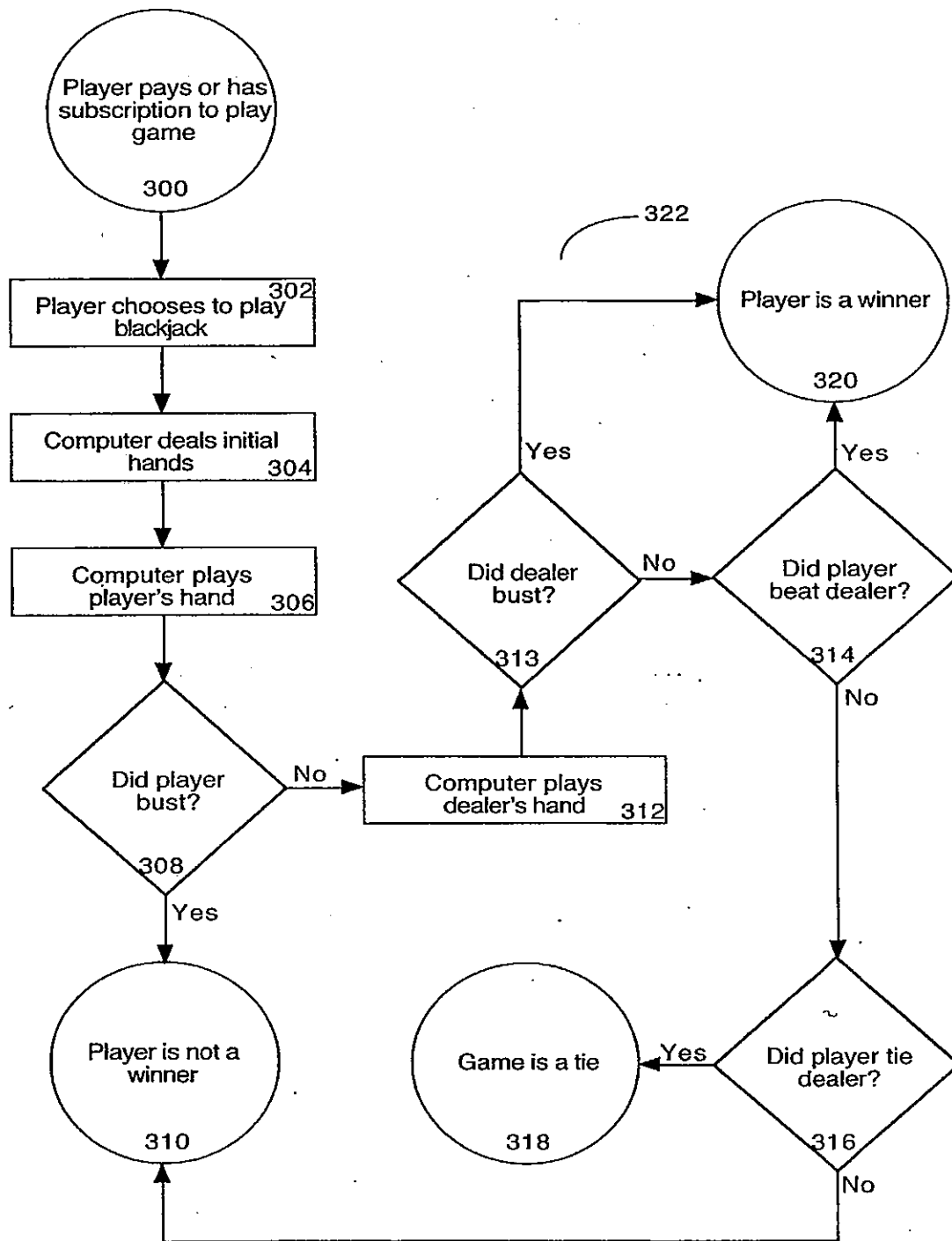


Figure 3a

GAME OF CHANCE AND SYSTEM AND
METHOD FOR PLAYING GAMES OF CHANCE

by: Mark E. Herrmann, et al.

Attorney Docket No.: R00586.70002

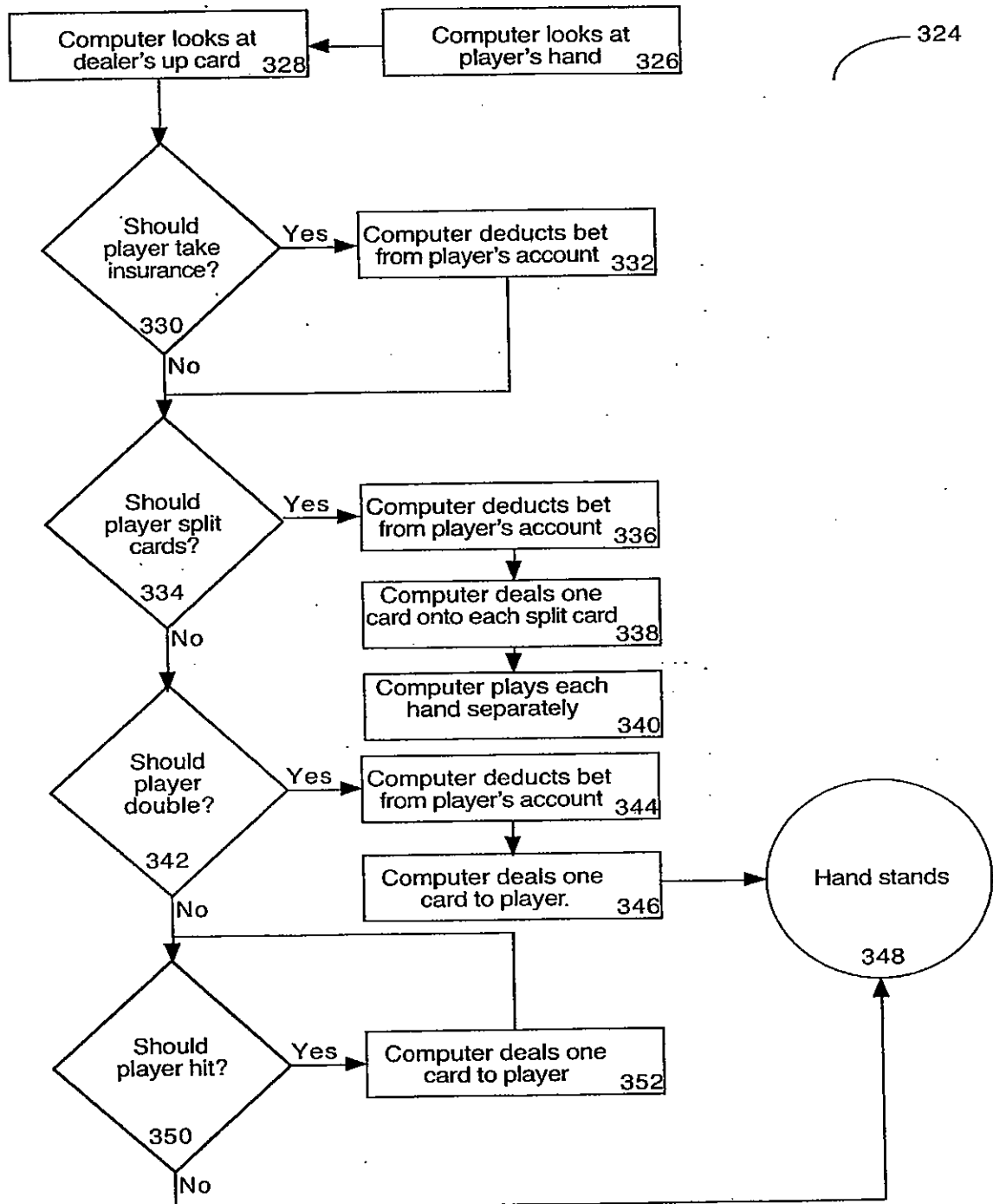


Figure 3b

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GAME OF CHANCE AND SYSTEM AND
METHOD FOR PLAYING GAMES OF CHANCE

by: Mark E. Herrmann, et al.
Attorney Docket No.: R00586.70002

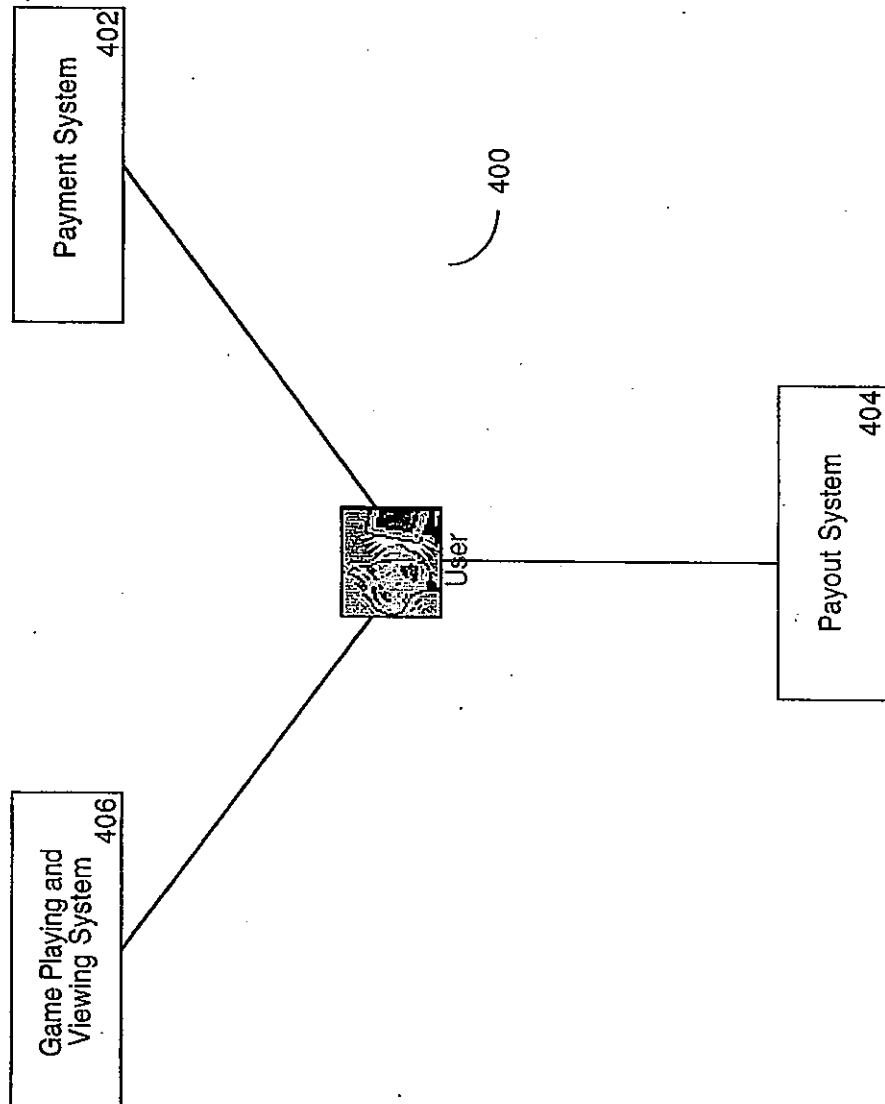


Figure 4

60444474.020303
 GAME OF CHANCE AND SYSTEM AND
 METHOD FOR PLAYING GAMES OF CHANCE

by: Mark E. Herrmann, et al.
 Attorney Docket No.: R00586.70002

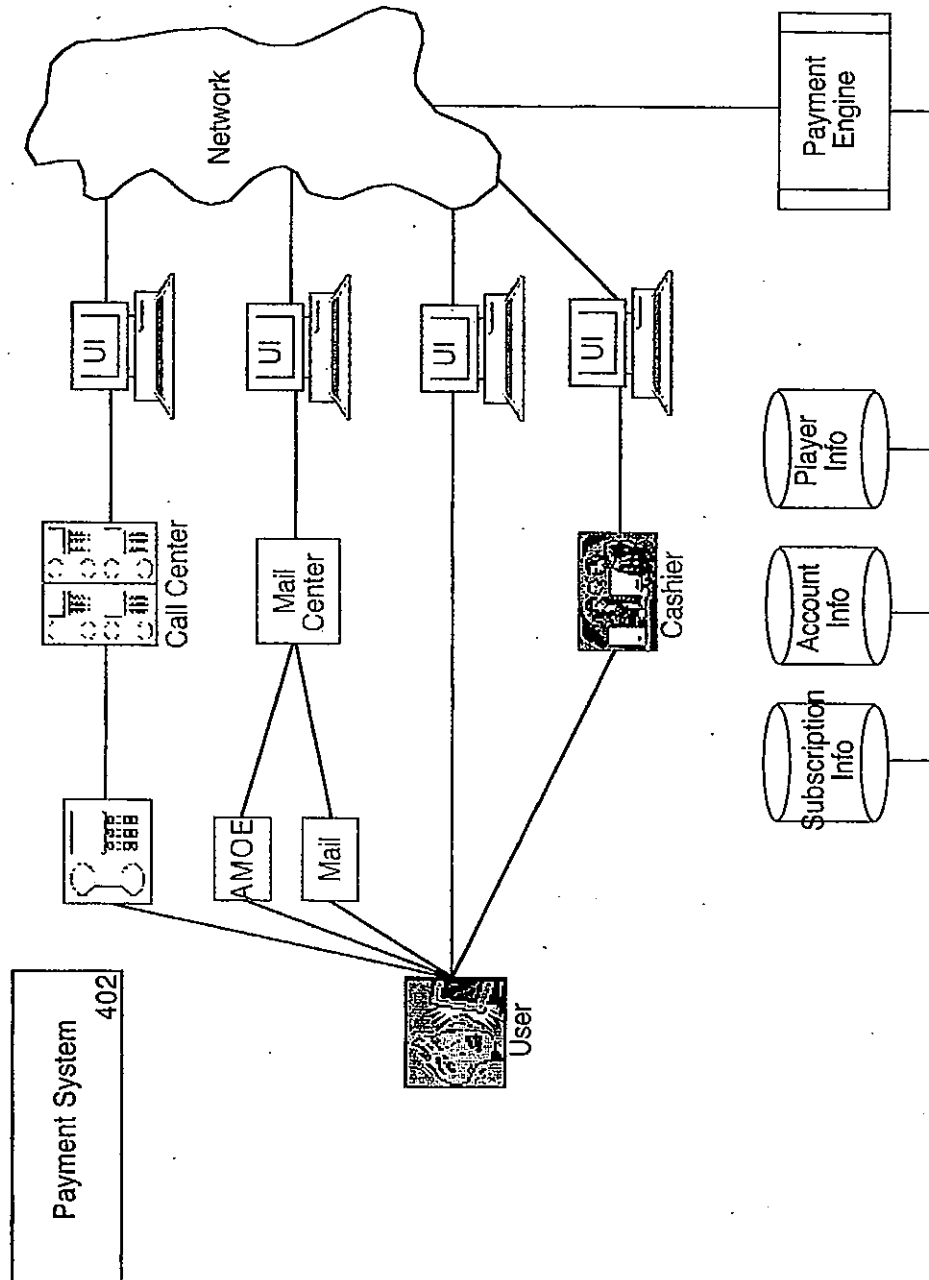


Figure 5

GAME OF CHANCE AND SYSTEM AND
METHOD FOR PLAYING GAMES OF CHANCE

by: Mark E. Herrmann, et al.

Attorney Docket No.: R00586.70002

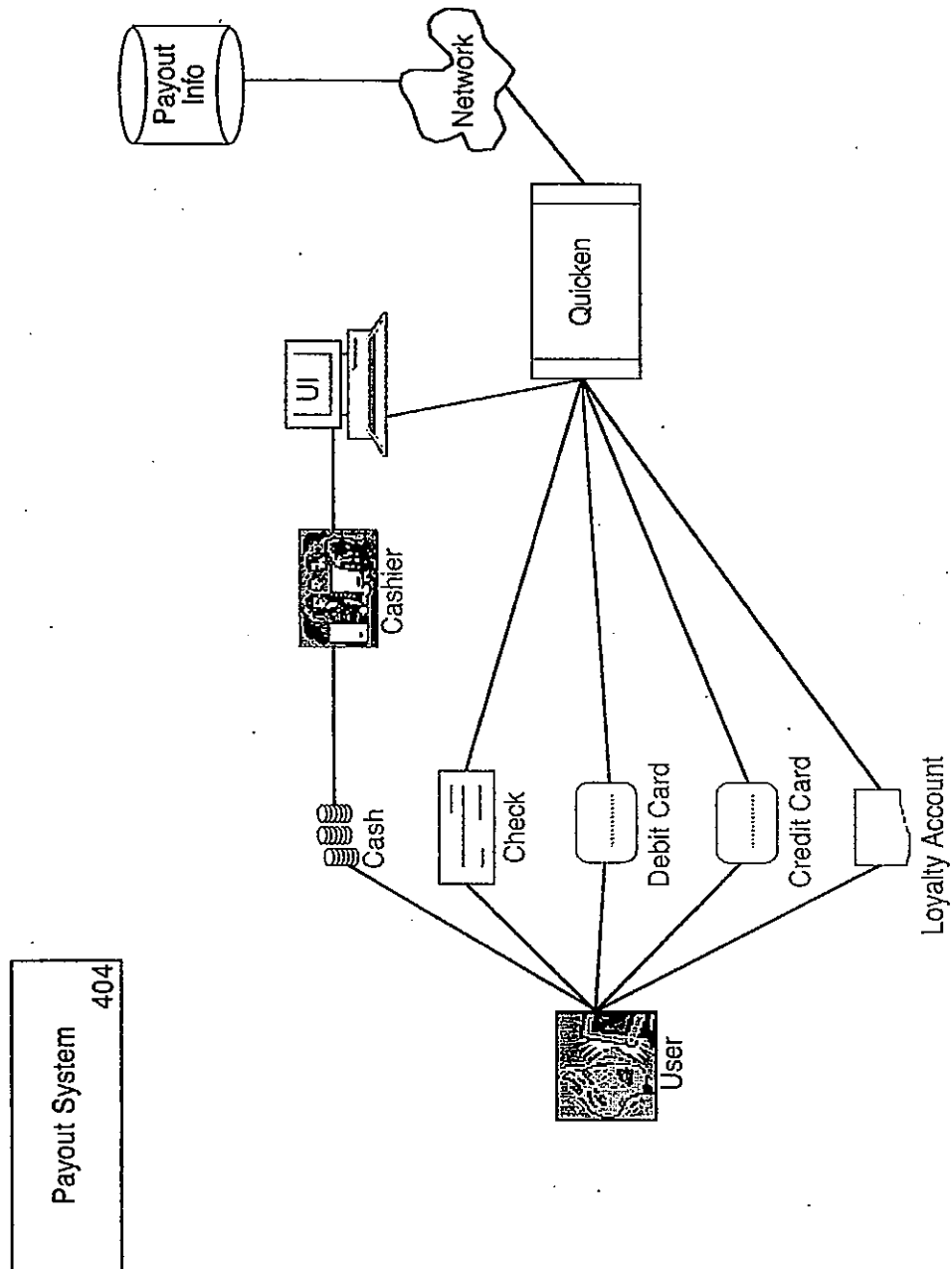


Figure 6

GAME OF CHANCE AND SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR PLAYING GAMES OF CHANCE
 by: Mark E. Herrmann, et al.
 Attorney Docket No.: R00586.70002

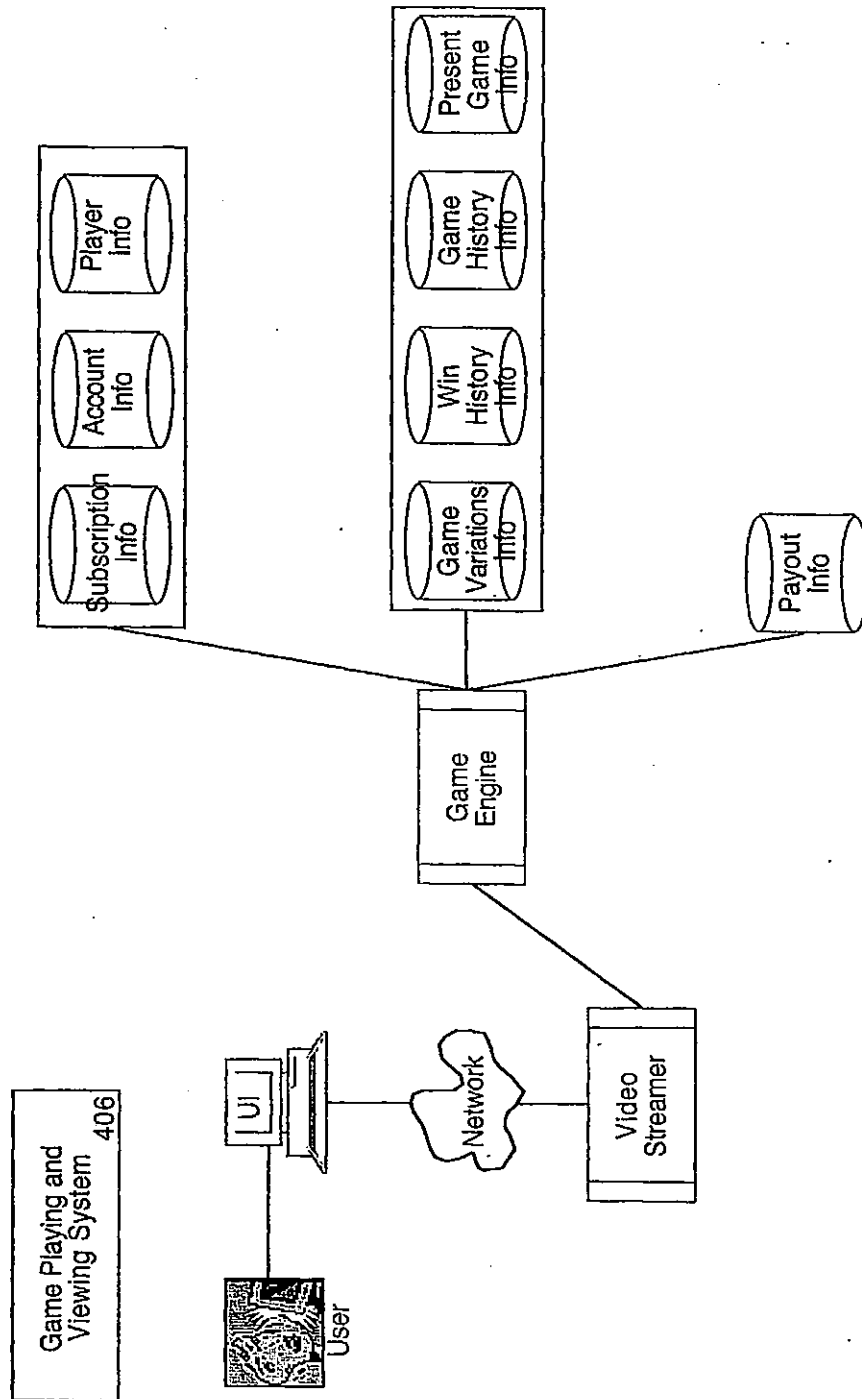


Figure 7

EXHIBIT F

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(19) **United States**(12) **Patent Application Publication**
Patterson(10) **Pub. No.: US 2005/0086126 A1**(43) **Pub. Date: Apr. 21, 2005**(54) **NETWORK ACCOUNT LINKING**(52) **U.S. Cl. 705/26**(76) **Inventor: Russell D. Patterson, Carlsbad, CA**
(US)(57) **ABSTRACT**

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Methods and apparatus for managing and linking network accounts to share access privileges among accounts. In one implementation, a method of managing network accounts includes: linking a second account having general access to a first account having member access; and granting at least part of said member access to said second account while said second account is linked to said first account; wherein said first account has a corresponding subscription, said general access provides at least one privilege, and said member access provides two or more privileges that are not provided by said general access.

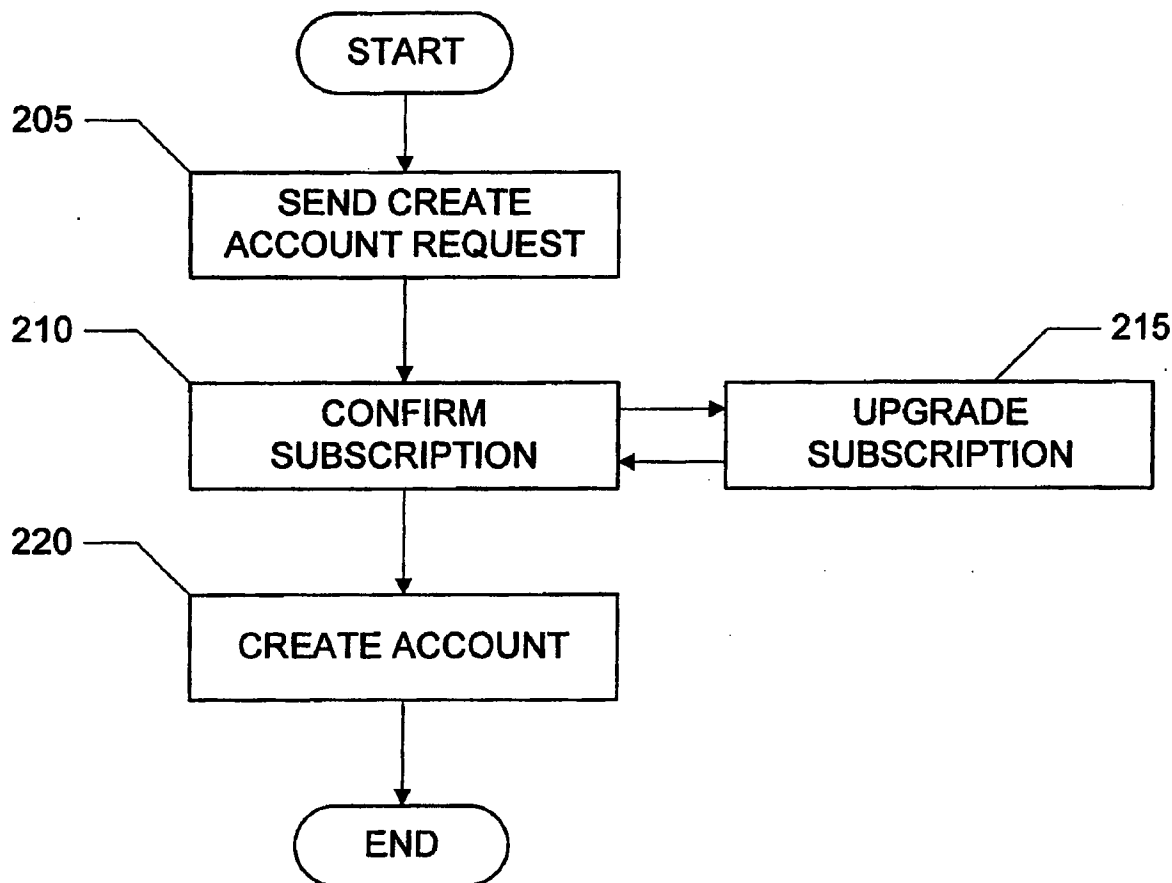
200

FIG. 1

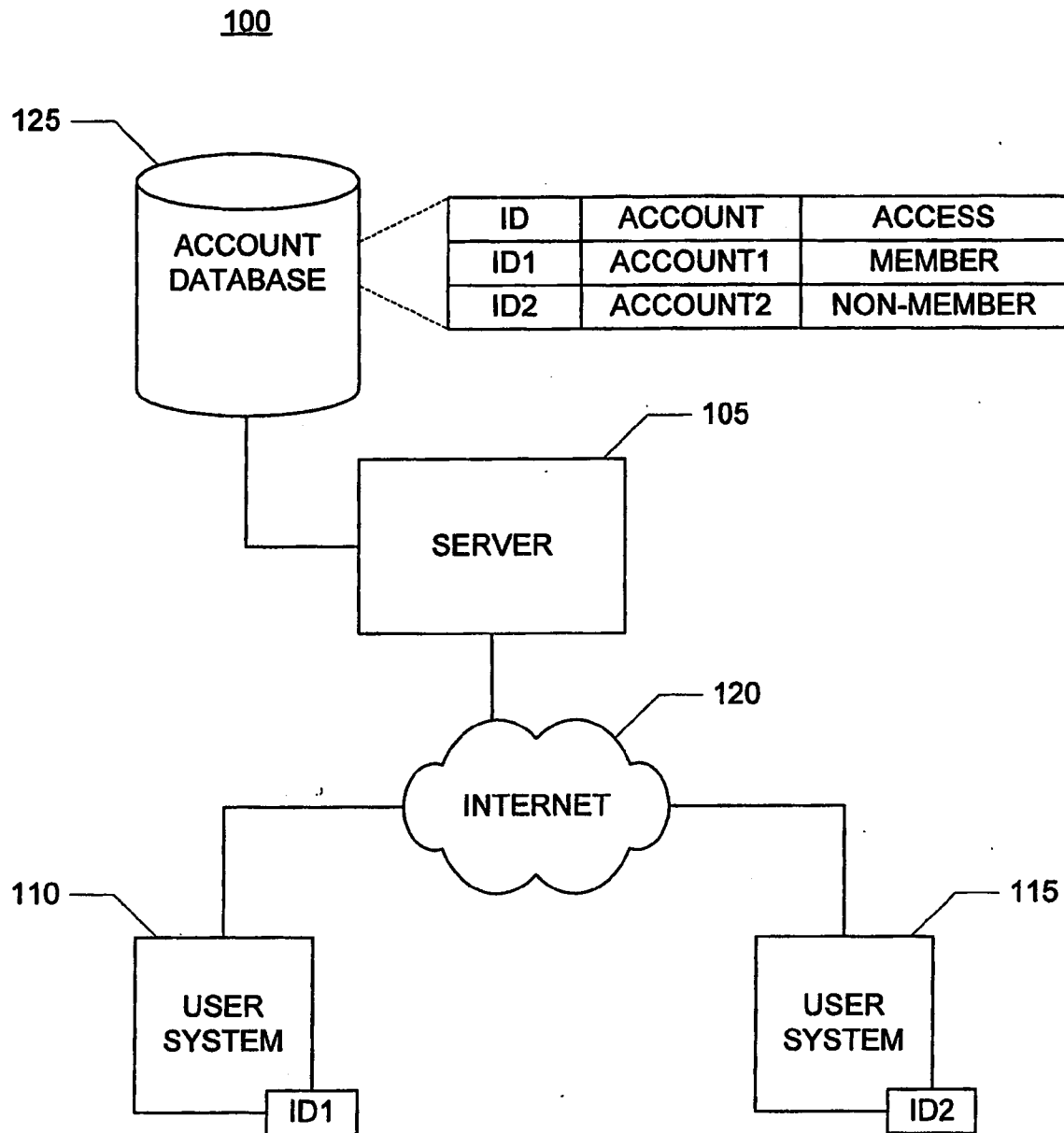


FIG. 2

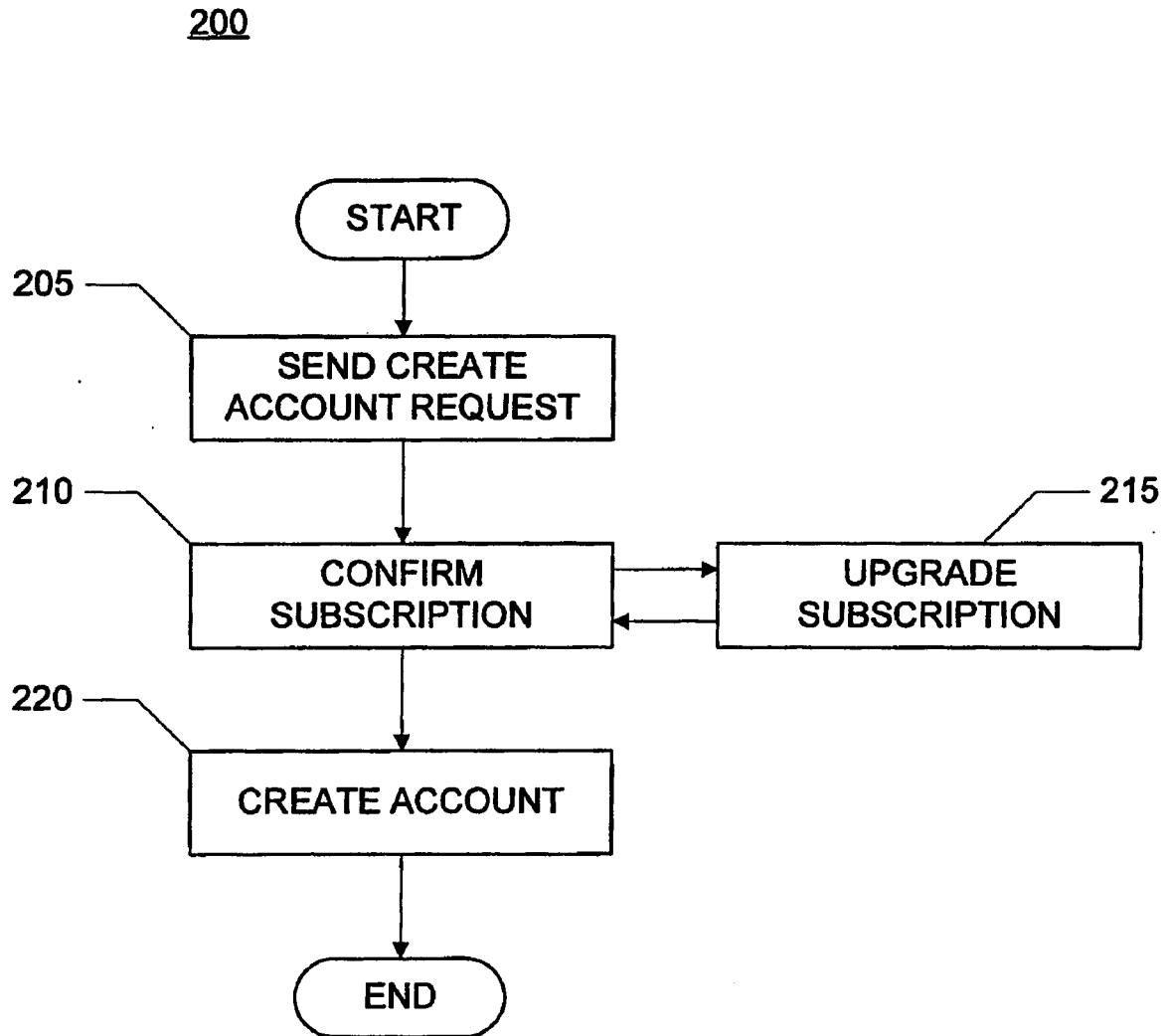


FIG. 3

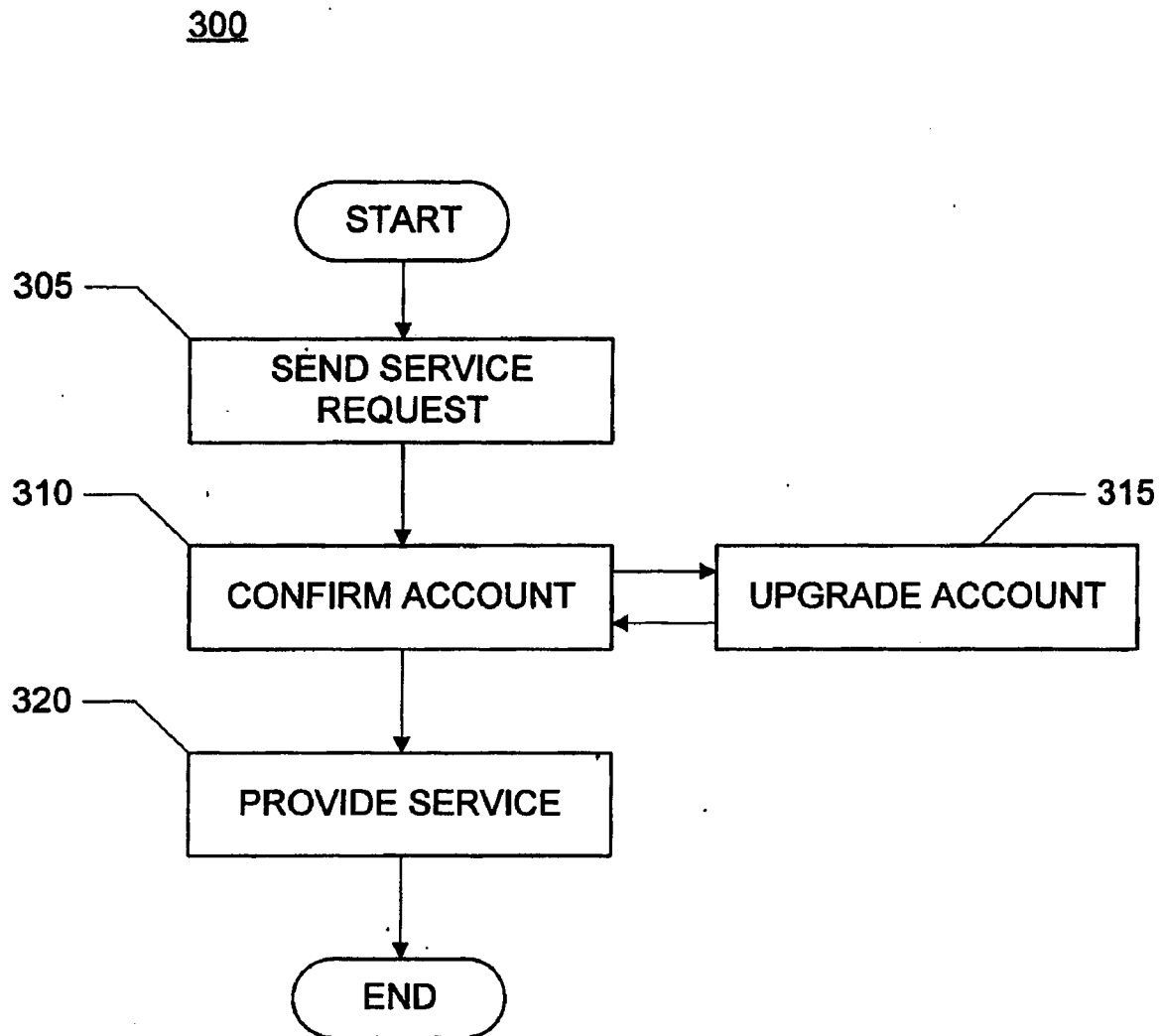


FIG. 4

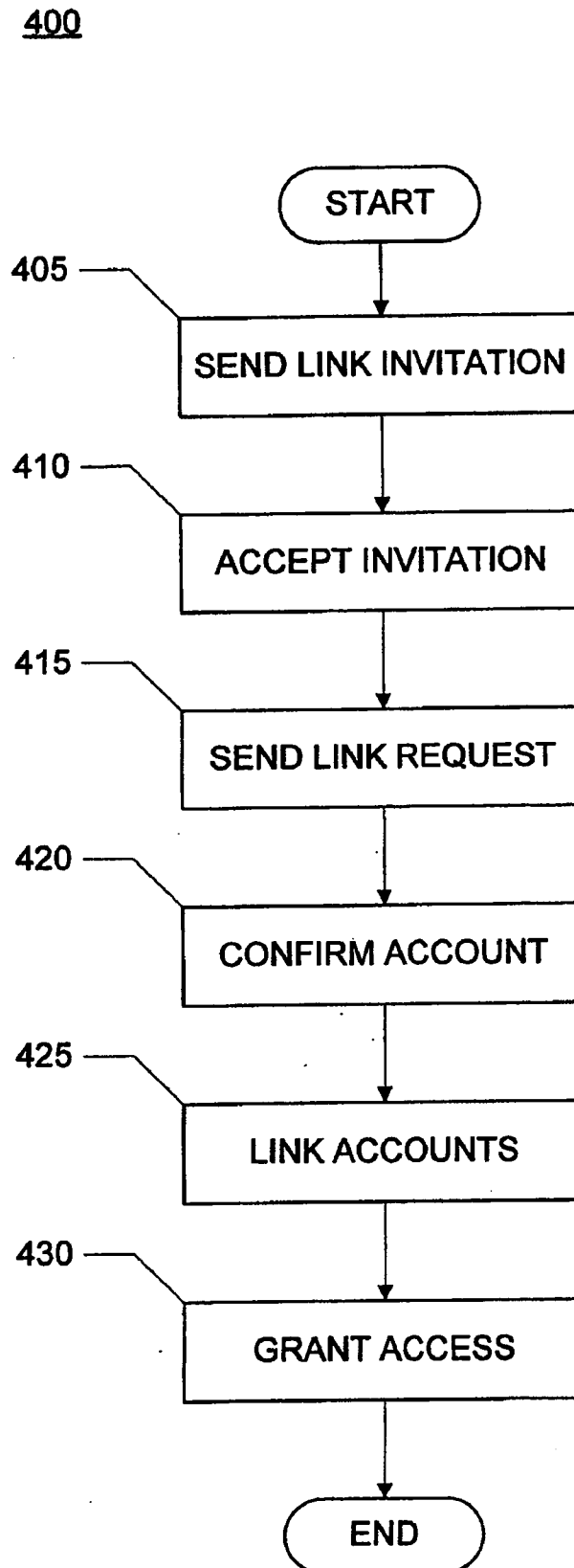
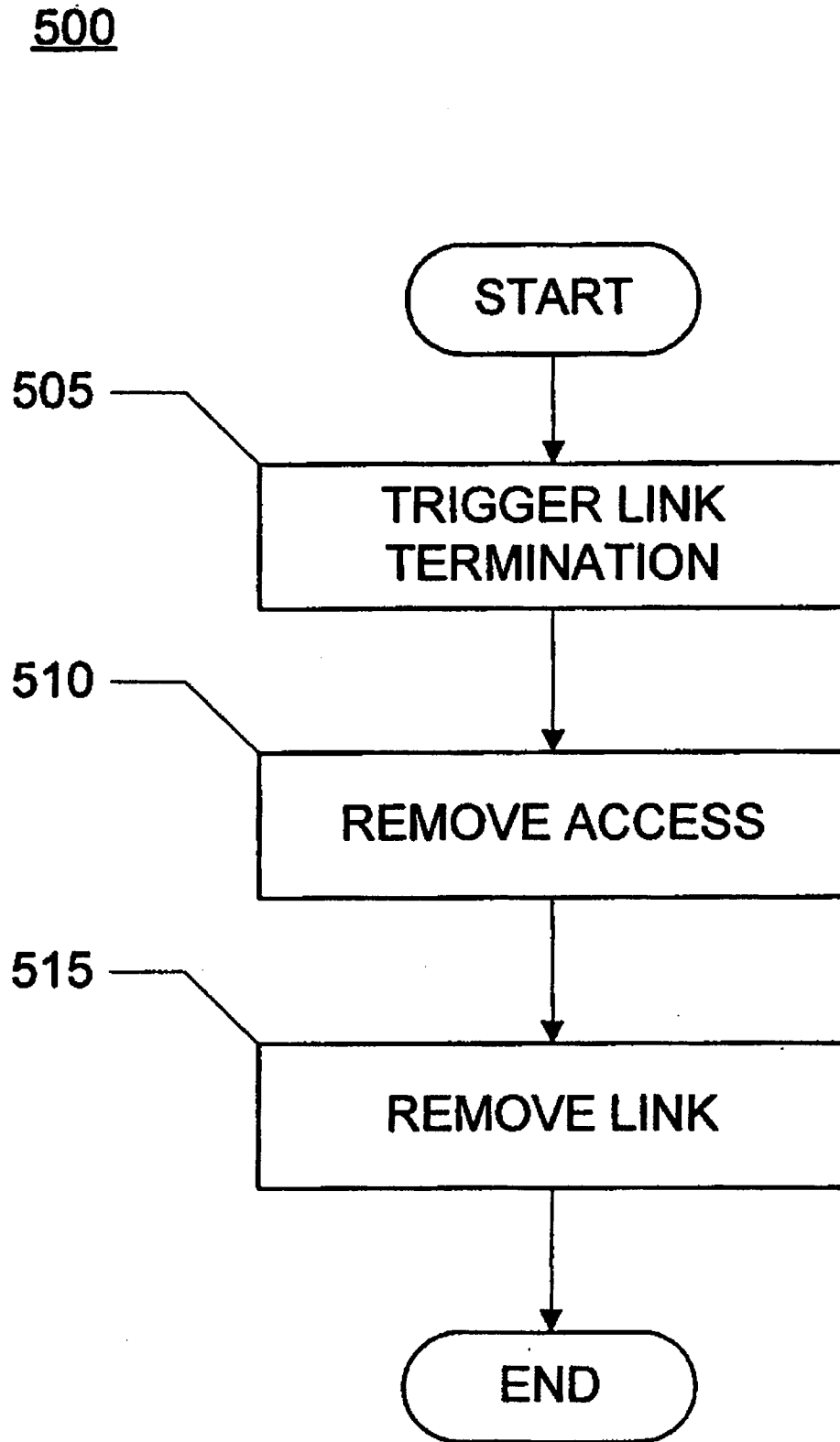


FIG. 5



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NETWORK ACCOUNT LINKING

BACKGROUND

[0001] One or more interconnected computer systems can provide an online environment for users to access resources available through the computer systems, such as web pages, multimedia data, and application software (e.g., games). The users can access the resources of the online environment using a local computer system with a network connection to one or more of the computer systems providing the online environment.

[0002] Online environments often use accounts to identify users and control access to the resources provided by the online environments. Each user typically has an account and the account indicates a level of access to the online resources. The provider of the online resource also often charges a fee for a subscription granting an account to a user. For an environment having different levels of access, a provider may charge higher fees for accounts with higher levels of access. Accordingly, from the provider's standpoint, it is desirable to encourage users to purchase more expensive subscriptions, and so the provider often attempts to make the accounts with higher levels of access more appealing to users.

SUMMARY

[0003] The present invention provides methods and apparatus for managing and linking network accounts to share access privileges among accounts. In one implementation, a method of managing network accounts includes: linking a second account having general access to a first account having member access; and granting at least part of said member access to said second account while said second account is linked to said first account; wherein said first account has a corresponding subscription, said general access provides at least one privilege, and said member access provides two or more privileges that are not provided by said general access.

[0004] In another implementation, a method of managing network accounts includes: creating an account having general access; receiving an upgrade request; confirming said account is permitted to be upgraded based on said account meeting one or more requirements for having member access; and upgrading said account to have member access.

[0005] In another implementation, a method of linking network accounts includes: creating a first account having general access; sending a link invitation indicating a second account having member access; receiving a link acceptance indicating said first account will be linked to said second account; sending a service request indicating a service having a minimum access requiring member access; and accessing said service.

[0006] In another implementation, a method of linking network accounts includes: creating a first account having member access; receiving a link invitation indicating a second account having general access; sending a link request indicating said second account is to be linked to said first account.

[0007] In another implementation, a computer program, stored on a tangible storage medium, for use in managing network accounts, includes executable instructions that

cause a computer to: link a second account having general access to a first account having member access; and grant at least part of said member access to said second account while said second account is linked to said first account; wherein said first account has a corresponding subscription, said general access provides at least one privilege, and said member access provides two or more privileges that are not provided by said general access.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0008] FIG. 1 shows a block diagram of one implementation of a network environment for linking network accounts.

[0009] FIG. 2 shows a flowchart of one implementation of creating a network account.

[0010] FIG. 3 shows a flowchart of one implementation of providing a service in the online environment to a user.

[0011] FIG. 4 shows a flowchart of one implementation of a link process for linking a non-member account to a member account.

[0012] FIG. 5 shows a flowchart of one implementation of unlinking two linked accounts.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0013] The present invention provides methods and apparatus for managing and linking network accounts to share access privileges among accounts. In one implementation, an account having lower privileges is linked to an account having higher privileges. While the accounts are linked, both accounts can access the higher privileges. When the link is removed, the accounts return to their original levels of access.

[0014] An illustrative example of one implementation is described below. Additional variations are described after this example.

[0015] In one example of one implementation, a first user has purchased a subscription for an online gaming environment. The online gaming environment is supported by a collection of server computer systems (or one system) connected to the Internet. The first user has a game console with a network connection (e.g., a PlayStation 2™ offered by Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. of Japan) and can access the online gaming environment through the game console, such as to play an online game with other users. The first user's subscription permits the user to create a member account in the online environment and the first user has done so. The member account provides the first user with member access. Member access allows the first user to participate in ordinary online games in the online environment. Member access also allows the first user to access various resources in the online environment that are restricted to accounts having member access. For example, the first user can access a member chat room to chat with other users having member access and can participate in online game tournaments that are restricted to accounts having member access.

[0016] A second user also has a game console with a network connection and can access the online gaming environment through the game console. However, the second user does not have a subscription to the online gaming environment. The online environment permits users to cre-

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ate non-member accounts if they do not have subscriptions. A non-member account provides a user with general access, but does not provide member access. The second user creates a non-member account in the online environment. Because the second user has a non-member account and does not have member access, the second user cannot immediately participate in an ordinary online game.

[0017] The online gaming environment allows a non-member account to be linked to a member account. While the non-member account is linked to the member account, the non-member account temporarily is granted limited member access. In this example, the limited member access allows a non-member account to participate in the same game (ordinary or tournament) as the member account to which the non-member account is linked. The limited member access does not allow the non-member account to participate in the chat room for member accounts. (As described below, in other implementations, different types of access can be granted to linked accounts.)

[0018] The second user asks the first user to link accounts by sending a link invitation to the first user's account. The first user agrees and requests that the online environment link the accounts. Once the accounts are linked, both accounts have appropriate access to participate in an online game. The first user and the second user then start and enjoy an online game. When the game is over, the first user requests that the link be terminated (or the server automatically terminates the link) and the accounts are returned to their former states.

[0019] In this example, the first user has a benefit that the second user does not because the first user has a member account with member access. The first user can play in an online game without linking to another account. The second user needs to find another user that is willing to let the second user link to their account. Because of this type of benefit, the member account will be desirable. In addition, because users with non-member accounts will seek out users with member accounts to be able to play in online games, the users with member accounts will be in demand. As a result, the users with member accounts will be popular and attract attention in the online environment. Again, the member accounts will be desirable. The online gaming environment provider can leverage this desirability for benefit through increased subscription revenue and increased use (e.g., leading to increased advertising revenue).

[0020] FIG. 1 shows a block diagram of one implementation of a network environment 100 for linking network accounts. The network environment 100 includes a server 105, a first user system 110, a second user system 115, and a network 120. The server 105, the first user system 110, and the second user system 120 are interconnected by the network 120.

[0021] The server 105 is a computer system including processing and storage for providing services to users at connected user systems and managing the network accounts of users. The server 105 provides the online environment for users. Some or all of the resources and services provided by the server 105 are restricted. The server 105 controls access to these restricted resources and services so that only accounts with current proper access levels are permitted to access restricted resources or services. The server 105 creates and manages accounts for users. In one implemen-

tation, the server 105 is connected to and maintains an account database 125 storing account information (e.g., information identifying the user for the account, the type of account, the current access level of the account, the permanent or default access level of the account, and the current user system for the account). The server 105 creates and manages subscription information for users, such as in local storage or in the account database 125. Alternatively, the server 105 has access to subscription information through the network 120. The subscription information indicates permissions for the user, including what types of network accounts the user is permitted to create. The server 105 also manages linking accounts and sharing access privileges among linked accounts.

[0022] The first user system 110 and the second user system 115 are also computer systems, such as network-capable game consoles. The user systems 110, 115 include processing and storage to interact with each other and the server 105 in accessing online services provided by the server 105. In addition, the user systems 110, 115 store identification information for the users (e.g., a name and password input by the users to the user systems 110, 115). In FIG. 1, the identification information of the first user is indicated by the label "ID1" on the first user system 110. The identification information of the second user is indicated by the label "ID2" on the second user system 115. In another implementation, the identification information identifies a user system, in addition to or instead of a user. The user systems 110, 115 provide the identification information to the server 105 so that the server 105 uses the correct account for each user system 110, 115.

[0023] The network 120 is an intermediary network (e.g., the Internet) providing paths for data transmission among the server 105, the first user system 110, and the second user system 115. In an alternative implementation, some or all of the server 105, the first user system 110, and the second user system 120 are directly connected, and so the intermediary network is not always used or is omitted.

[0024] In FIG. 1, the first user system 110 has an account with the server that is a member account. The account of the first user system 110 is indicated by the label on the account database 125 showing that identification information ID1 corresponds to the account ACCOUNT1 and that the account ACCOUNT1 has an access level of MEMBER. The second user system 115 has an account with the server that is a non-member account. The account of the second user system 115 is indicated by the label on the account database 125 showing that identification information ID2 corresponds to the account ACCOUNT2 and that the account ACCOUNT2 has an access level of NON-MEMBER. If the account for the second user system 115 is linked to the first user system 110, as described below, the server 105 updates the account database 125 to indicate the link and any changes in access levels for the accounts.

[0025] In one implementation, a network account is one of two types: a member account or a non-member account. Each type of account provides a different level of access. A member account provides member access and a non-member account provides non-member or general access. In one implementation, member access includes general access. In another implementation, a member account provides both member access and general access. A member account

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requires that the user have an appropriate subscription. The user establishes a subscription by paying a fee to the online environment provider (e.g., a one-time or monthly fee). In another implementation, the member account has one or more additional requirements, such as the completion of specified goals in the online environment. Alternatively, these additional requirements replace the subscription requirement. A non-member account does not require a subscription. Alternatively, the non-member account requires a less expensive subscription than the member account.

[0026] The level of access for an account determines the privileges available to the user of the account. Some resources or services provided by a server are restricted to accounts that have the proper level of access. For example, participating in an online game or accessing a particular web site or page can be restricted to accounts having member access. Some other resources or services can be unrestricted so that any account can be permitted access. For example, a general chat room service can be unrestricted, while a members chat room is restricted to accounts having member access.

[0027] In various implementations, a wide variety of privileges for higher levels of access can be granted. Examples of what member access allows a user to do in various implementations include, but are not limited to (e.g., where member access provides one or more of these privileges):

- [0028] participating in an online game;
- [0029] initiating an online game;
- [0030] participating in an online game limited to member accounts;
- [0031] using special resources while playing an online game, such as accessing special game areas (e.g., entering special buildings in a game) or special game resources (e.g., using special tools in a game or hearing special background music), or using special game functions (e.g., using special moves or techniques in a fighting game);
- [0032] using special indicators in a game to indicate the level of access available to the account (e.g., the user's character or team has a special uniform or symbol visible in the game);
- [0033] storing data in the online environment, such as a personal web page, high scores, or saved game data;
- [0034] reading and posting messages on an online forum or bulletin board;
- [0035] receiving or accessing a newsletter;
- [0036] accessing restricted web resources (e.g., a members area collection of web pages);
- [0037] starting a group or clan in the online environment for other users to join;
- [0038] joining a restricted group or clan in the online environment;
- [0039] receiving a discount or coupons for merchandise, services, or subscriptions purchased through the online environment or through an affiliated source; and
- [0040] accepting a link invitation to allow a non-member account to link to the member account.

[0041] In another implementation, the online environment supports more than two types of accounts and more than two levels or types of access. In this case, different or overlapping sets of privileges are available for some or all of the account types and the different levels of access. Similarly, different types of accounts may have different requirements to create, such as different types of subscriptions with different fees. In another implementation, a user can add privileges to an account by updating the user's subscription (without changing the type of account).

[0042] FIG. 2 shows a flowchart 200 of one implementation of creating a network account. Initially, the user has connected a user system to the server and provided identification information to the user system. The user may or may not have previously established a subscription for the online environment.

[0043] The user system sends a create account request to the server, block 205. The user causes the user system to send the request. The create account request indicates the user's identification information and a type of account to create. In one implementation, the create account request also indicates subscription information for the user.

[0044] The server checks the subscription information for the user to confirm that the subscription of the user permits the user to have the type of account requested, block 210. The server accesses local or remote subscription information for the user. In one implementation, the server uses the identification information to access subscription information stored by the server (e.g., in a subscription database). The subscription information indicates permissions for the user, including what types of network accounts the user is permitted to create.

[0045] As described above, one or more account types are restricted and require a certain level of subscription to permit creation. Similarly, one or more account types are unrestricted and do not require a subscription to create. When a user requests a restricted account type, the server compares the permissions of the subscription information with the requested account type to determine if the account is permitted to be created. If the account type is not permitted, the server proceeds to block 215 to offer to update the user's subscription. If the account type is permitted, the server proceeds to block 220 to create the account. If the user does not have a subscription at all and has requested a restricted account type, the server proceeds to block 215. When a user requests an unrestricted account type, the server does not need to check the subscription information for the user and can proceed directly to block 220.

[0046] When a user is not permitted to create the requested account type, the server offers the user an upgrade in subscription, block 215. The server offers to upgrade the user's subscription to the appropriate level to permit the creation of the requested account type. Alternatively, the server offers multiple subscription levels to the user. The server indicates to the user the cost or requirements for upgrading the subscription. If the user declines to upgrade, the server terminates the account creation process without creating an account. If the user accepts the upgrade, the server handles the transaction to meet whatever cost or requirements are needed for the upgrade (e.g., processing an online credit card payment). After completing the transaction, the server returns to block 210 to confirm the new

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subscription. Alternatively, the server confirms the upgraded subscription permits the requested account type as part of the upgrade transaction and so proceeds directly to block 220.

[0047] After confirming that the user's subscription permits the creation of an account of the requested account type, the server creates a new account for the user, block 220. The server creates the new account and stores the account information in the account database. The account information indicates the user's identification information, the type of account, and the current level of access.

[0048] A user can also upgrade the user's account by sending an upgrade account request to the server, indicating the desired account type. The server handles the upgrade account request similarly to the create account request: confirming that the requested account type or privilege is permitted by the user's subscription, upgrading the subscription if necessary and approved, and upgrading the account if permitted.

[0049] In one implementation, one or more types of accounts have requirements related to the online game environment, in addition to (or instead of) a particular subscription level or fee. These online environment requirements indicate accomplishments achieved in the online environment, such as a minimum number of hours or games played, a minimum high score, a minimum number of victories, or a completed action or event within a game (e.g., defeating a particular game opponent or finding a particular game item). When a user has completed one of these achievements, the server offers to upgrade the user's account, if any additional requirements (e.g., payment) are met.

[0050] FIG. 3 shows a flowchart 300 of one implementation of providing a service in the online environment to a user. Initially, a user has created a network account. The user has connected a user system to the server and provided identification information to the user system. The user may or may not have previously established a subscription for the online environment.

[0051] The user system sends a service request to the server, block 305. The user causes the user system to send the request. In some situations, the user system or server may create multiple service requests from a single request by a user. The service request indicates the user's identification information and a type of service. In one implementation, the service request also indicates subscription information for the user.

[0052] The server checks the user's account information to confirm that the access level of the user's account permits the user to receive the service requested, block 310. The server accesses the account information stored in the account database. As described above, the account information indicates a current access level for the account.

[0053] One or more types of services are restricted and require a certain access level. Similarly, one or more types of services are unrestricted and do not require any particular access level. When a user requests a restricted service, the server compares the access level of the user's account with the required access level of the requested service. If the user's access level is insufficient (i.e., the user's access level does not meet or exceed the required access level), the server

proceeds to block 315 to offer to upgrade the user's account. If the user's access level is sufficient, the server proceeds to block 320 to provide the service. When a user requests an unrestricted service, the server does not need to check the user's access level and can proceed directly to block 320.

[0054] When a user's account does not have the necessary account level for the requested service, the server offers the user an upgrade in account type, block 315. The server offers to upgrade the user's account to the appropriate account type to have the access level needed for the requested service. Alternatively, the server offers multiple account types to the user. In another implementation, the server also offers a temporary increase in access level for a limited number of uses (e.g., one) without changing the account type. The server indicates to the user the cost or requirements for upgrading the account. If the user declines to upgrade, the server terminates the service process without providing the requested service. If the user accepts the upgrade, the server handles the transaction to meet whatever cost or requirements are needed for the upgrade (e.g., processing an online credit card payment). After completing the transaction, the server returns to block 310 to confirm the new account for the requested service. Alternatively, the server confirms the upgraded account has the account level needed for the requested service as part of the upgrade transaction and so proceeds directly to block 320.

[0055] After confirming that the user's account has the access level required for the requested service, the server provides the requested service, block 320. The server provides the service in the online environment or causes a remote system to provide the service.

[0056] The server handles a request from a user system for access to a resource in a similar way.

[0057] In an alternative implementation, when the user's does not have the required access level for the requested service, instead of offering to upgrade the user's account (or as an additional option), the server offers to find another user's account for linking. As described below, when an account is linked to another account, the account with the lower access level temporarily receives the higher access level of the other account. The server can provide a matching service to bring a user requesting a service that is beyond the user's access level to another user that has the appropriate access level. If the user accepts the server's offer, the server sends a link invitation for the user, as described below, and if the link is successful, the server returns to block 315 to confirm the adjusted access level of the user's account. If the user declines the server's offer, the server terminates the service process without providing the requested service.

[0058] FIG. 4 shows a flowchart 400 of one implementation of a link process for linking a non-member account to a member account. Initially, a first user has connected a first user system to the server and provided identification information to the first user system. The first user has created a member account having member access in the online environment. A second user has connected a second user system to the server and provided identification information to the second user system. The second user has created a non-member account having non-member access. In the description of FIG. 4, the second user will be linking the second user's account to the account of the first user. In this case, the first user's account is the "linked account" and the second

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user's account is the "linking account" (the users and user systems can also be referred to as linked and linking).

[0059] The second user system sends a link invitation to the first user system, block 405. The second user causes the second user system to send the request. The link invitation indicates the first user as the intended recipient and indicates the account of the second user as the linking account. The link invitation is a request to the first user to allow the account of the second user to be linked to the account of the first user. The second user system sends the link invitation to the first user system through the server. Alternatively, the second user system has appropriate information to send the link invitation to the first user system directly (without using the server) and does so. In one implementation, the link invitation is sent as a challenge to play a game.

[0060] In another implementation, a user system sends a link invitation indicating the user's identification information and a target user to the server. The server retrieves the user's account information and adds the account information to the link invitation. The server then sends the updated link invitation to the user system of the target user.

[0061] As noted above, the second user system sends the link invitation at the request of the second user. In another implementation, the server sends a link invitation on behalf of a user, such as when the user requests a service for which the user's account does not have an appropriate access level. In another implementation, the server sends the link invitation to the second user system on behalf of the first user system, such as when the user of the first user system wants to invite the user of the second user system to join a game.

[0062] The first user system sends an invitation acceptance to the second user system, block 410. The first user decides whether to accept the link invitation. If the first user decides not to accept the link invitation, the first user system sends a decline message to the server and the link process ends. Alternatively, the first user system does not respond and ignores the link invitation to decline the invitation. If the first user accepts the link invitation, the first user system sends the invitation acceptance to the second user system through the server. The invitation acceptance confirms that the first user system will request that the server set up a link between the two accounts. In another implementation, the first user system has appropriate information to send the invitation acceptance to the second user system directly (without using the server) and does so.

[0063] The first user system sends a link request to the server, block 415. The link request indicates the first user's account and the second user's account. In another implementation, the link request indicates identification information for the first user and the second user and the server retrieves appropriate account information.

[0064] The server confirms the accounts permit the second user's account to be linked to the first user's account, block 420. The server retrieves appropriate account information (and subscription information or other information if needed) to confirm that the first user's account is permitted to accept links from other accounts and that the second user's account is permitted to link to other accounts. For example, the server may place restrictions on creating links between accounts for misuse of accounts or to limit network traffic under certain conditions. In one implementation, an

account is permitted to link to only one account at a time or be linked to only account at a time. If the server determines that the link between the accounts is permitted, the server proceeds to block 425 to create the link. If the server determines that that link is not permitted, the server ends the link process without creating a link. In another implementation, if the link is not permitted and upgrading one or both of the accounts or subscriptions would permit the link, the server offers an appropriate upgrade (similar to offering to upgrade a subscription or account, as described above).

[0065] After confirming the accounts permit the link to be created, the server links the second user's account to the first user's account, block 425. The server updates the account information for the second user's account to indicate that the second user's account is linked to the first user's account. The server also updates the account information for the first user's account to indicate that the second user's account is linked to the first user's account. In another implementation, the link is "one-way" and so the server does not update the account information for the first user's account.

[0066] After linking the accounts, the server grants the access level of the first user's account to the second user's account, block 430. The first user's account is a member account and has member access. The second user's account is a non-member account and has non-member or general access. The server updates the second user's account information to indicate that the current access level has been changed to member access. As described above, when a user requests a service from the server, the server checks the current level of access for the user's account and so the effect of a link will be reflected in the server's decision of whether to provide a service to a user or not. The server preserves the original or default level of access for the second user's account. As described below, when the link terminates, the server updates the account information for the second user's account to indicate that the current level of access is once again at the original access level of non-member access. At this time, the accounts are now linked.

[0067] In another implementation, an account can be linked to multiple accounts. In this case, when an account is linked to another account, the server records in the linking account's account information which privileges or access level is granted from which linked account. When a link is terminated, the server only removes the privileges or access level that was granted by the terminated link.

[0068] FIG. 5 shows a flowchart of one implementation of unlinking two linked accounts. Initially, a second user's account is linked to a first user's account, such as after the conclusion of the link process described above referring to FIG. 4.

[0069] An event triggers the termination of the link, block 505. The triggering event can be a request from either of the users of the linked accounts or an event that causes the server to determine the link is to be terminated. The server has one or more rules which trigger the termination of links. For example, if one of the users misuses an account, the server may decide to terminate the link. In another example, when either of the user systems disconnects from the server, the server terminates the link.

[0070] The server removes the access level granted to the second user's account by the link, block 510. The server

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updates the account information for the second user's account to indicate that the current level of access is once again at the original access level.

[0071] The server removes the link from the accounts, block 515. The server updates the account information for both of the accounts to indicate that the link has been removed. At this time, the accounts are no longer linked.

[0072] In one implementation described above, when one account (the linking account) is linked to another account (the linked account), the linking account receives the access level of the linked account while the accounts are linked. This type of link is a direct link. However, in other implementations, various types of links between accounts are available in addition to or instead of direct links. In one implementation, the user of the linking account requests a particular type of link in the link invitation. In another implementation, the user of the linked account accepts or specifies a particular type of link in the link acceptance. In another implementation, the server selects the type of link based on the context (e.g., one type of link is used for online game tournaments and another type of link is used for general use in the online environment).

[0073] In one implementation, a server provides limited time links. In a limited time link, the server terminates the link when a specific time period has elapsed since the establishment of the link (e.g., one day), or a specific time has been reached (e.g., the end of the day when the link was established).

[0074] In another implementation, a server provides persistent links. In a persistent link, the link does not terminate until one of the users of the linking or linked accounts requests the termination. The persistent link does not terminate when either or both of the user systems disconnects. The persistent link is still in effect when a user returns to the online environment, even using a different user system than when the link was established.

[0075] In another implementation, a server provides limited use links. In a limited use link, after a set number of services have been requested through the linking account after establishing the link, the server terminates the link. For example, one limited use link allows only one use. In one implementation, different services consume different numbers of available services from the limited use number. For example, some services are "free" and do not use up available services while some other services are "expensive" and use up more than one available service (e.g., counting as two uses of services).

[0076] In another implementation, a server provides limited purpose links. In a limited purpose link, the linking account receives the access level of the linked account for one or more specific services. For example, the linking account has the higher access level only for playing one particular online game.

[0077] In another implementation, a server provides partial links. In a partial link, the linked account has multiple levels of access and linking account does not receive all the levels of access of the linked account. For example, in one implementation, an account can have access levels A, B, C, and/or D. Each level provides different privileges. The linking account has access level A. The linked account has access levels A, B, and C. When the user of the linked

account accepts the link invitation, the user of the linked account specifies that the link is to be a partial link granting access level B only. As a result, the linking account will have access levels A and B, but not C, while the link exists. In another example, a member account has a member access level and a members-only access level. The members-only access level is restricted to accounts that have appropriate subscriptions and the members-only access level is not permitted to be granted to an account through a link. As a result, the linking account to a member account will receive the member access level but will not receive the restricted members-only access level (assuming the linking account lacks the appropriate subscription).

[0078] In another implementation, a server provides loan links. In a loan link, the linked account transfers the linked account's level of access to the linking account while the link exists. As a result, the linked account no longer has that level of access and is disabled or has a reduced level of access. In one implementation, the accounts exchange their levels of access.

[0079] In another implementation, a server provides membership links. For a membership link, the server creates a group for a leader account and the server automatically links any accounts belonging to the group to the leader account. As a result, all of the accounts belonging to the group will have the access level of the leader account.

[0080] In another implementation, a server provides pool links. For a pool link, the server maintains a pool and an associated group of pool accounts that are authorized to access the pool. A pool account can contribute a link to the pool. A pool account can link to the pool to receive a contributed link (rather than linking to a specific account). For example, the server provides a pool for a clan of accounts. Each clan member can access the pool. A number of clan members with higher levels of access provide their access levels to the pool and so the same number of clan members with lower access levels can link to the pool and receive the higher access level. The pool links allow the pool accounts to share the access levels more freely without requiring a one-to-one relationship be established by the users.

[0081] In another implementation, a server provides one or more types of links that are combinations of the types of links described above. For example, a server provides limited time limited purpose links. In addition, the types of links described above are illustrative and other types of links are possible as well.

[0082] In an alternative implementation, the server does not link accounts but instead links accounts to privileges. In this case, an account has one more privileges (e.g., created as separate data objects from the account). A user or an account can make a privilege of the account available for sharing or linking. Another user can link that user's account to the privilege that the first user has made available. For example, an account includes one or more references to privileges. For privileges owned by or attributed to the account, the references indicate privilege objects. An account can make a privilege available to be linked to by indicating the privilege is available for sharing. When a linking account is linked to a shared privilege of a "donor" account, the linking account stores a reference to the shared privilege. As a result, the shared privilege can have multiple

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references indicating the privilege (e.g., the owning account and one or more linking accounts).

[0083] The various implementations of the invention are realized in electronic hardware, computer software, or combinations of these technologies. Some implementations include one or more computer programs executed by a programmable processor or computer. For example, referring to FIG. 1, in one implementation, the server and the user systems include one or more programmable processors. In general, each computer includes one or more processors, one or more data-storage components (e.g., volatile or non-volatile memory modules and persistent optical and magnetic storage devices, such as hard and floppy disk drives, CD-ROM drives, and magnetic tape drives), one or more input devices (e.g., mice and keyboards), and one or more output devices (e.g., display consoles and printers).

[0084] The computer programs include executable code that is usually stored in a persistent storage medium and then copied into memory at run-time. The processor executes the code by retrieving program instructions from memory in a prescribed order. When executing the program code, the computer receives data from the input and/or storage devices, performs operations on the data, and then delivers the resulting data to the output and/or storage devices.

[0085] Various illustrative implementations of the present invention have been described. However, one of ordinary skill in the art will see that additional implementations are also possible and within the scope of the present invention. For example, while the above description focuses on implementations providing an online environment for playing games, the online environment can provide different or additional services as well, such as chatting or publishing and sharing data (e.g., text, pictures, audio, video, or multimedia).

[0086] Accordingly, the present invention is not limited to only those implementations described above.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of managing network accounts, comprising:

linking a second account having general access to a first account having member access; and

granting at least part of said member access to said second account while said second account is linked to said first account;

wherein said first account has a corresponding subscription,

said general access provides at least one privilege, and said member access provides two or more privileges that are not provided by said general access.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein:

said subscription has a higher cost than a cost needed to be eligible for an account having general access.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to participate in an online game.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to initiate an online game.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to access a restricted online resource.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to participate in an online game in a way that indicates the account has member access.

7. The method of claim 6, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to participate in an online game with a visual cue indicating the account has member access.

8. The method of claim 1, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to participate in an online game in a way that is different from a way an account without this privilege of member access participates.

9. The method of claim 8, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to access one or more special resources in an online game that are not available to an account without member access.

10. The method of claim 8, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to access one or more special features in an online game that are not available to an account without this privilege of member access.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein:

said first account also has members-only access, and

said members-only access provides one or more privileges different from said two or more privileges provided by said member access and from said at least one privilege provided by said general access.

12. The method of claim 11, wherein:

said second account does not have members-only access when said second account is linked to said first account.

13. The method of claim 1, wherein:

said first account also has said general access.

14. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

receiving a create member account request indicating said subscription;

confirming said subscription allows creating a member account; and

creating said first account.

15. The method of claim 14, further comprising:

upgrading said subscription to allow creating a member account.

16. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

receiving a create non-member account request; and

creating said second account.

17. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

receiving a link request indicating said first account and said second account; and

confirming said first account allows linking.

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18. The method of claim 17, further comprising:

confirming said second account allows linking.

19. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

receiving an unlink request indicating said first account and said second account;

revoking said granted at least part of said member access from said second account; and

unlinking said second account from said first account.

20. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

receiving a service request indicating a service having a minimum access and an account;

confirming said requesting account currently has access meeting said minimum access of said indicated service; and

providing said service.

21. The method of claim 20, further comprising:

upgrading said requesting account to have access meeting said minimum access of said indicated service.

22. The method of claim 1, wherein:

granting said at least part of said member access includes granting less than all of said two or more privileges of said member access to said second account.

23. The method of claim 1, wherein:

granting said at least part of said member access includes granting at least one of said two or more privileges of said member access to said second account for a limited period of time.

24. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

removing said member access from said first account while said second account is linked to said first account.

25. The method of claim 1, wherein:

said second account is linked to said first account indirectly through an intermediary data object.

26. The method of claim 25, wherein:

said intermediary data object is a pool.

27. A method of managing network accounts, comprising:

creating an account having general access;

receiving an upgrade request;

confirming said account is permitted to be upgraded based on said account meeting one or more requirements for having member access; and

upgrading said account to have member access.

28. A method of linking network accounts, comprising:

creating a first account having general access;

sending a link invitation indicating a second account having member access;

receiving a link acceptance indicating said first account will be linked to said second account;

sending a service request indicating a service having a minimum access requiring member access; and

accessing said service.

29. A method of linking network accounts, comprising:

creating a first account having member access;

receiving a link invitation indicating a second account having general access;

sending a link request indicating said second account is to be linked to said first account.

30. A computer program, stored on a tangible storage medium, for use in managing network accounts, the program comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

link a second account having general access to a first account having member access; and

grant at least part of said member access to said second account while said second account is linked to said first account;

wherein said first account has a corresponding subscription,

said general access provides at least one privilege, and said member access provides two or more privileges that are not provided by said general access.

31. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

said subscription has a higher cost than a cost needed to be eligible for an account having general access.

32. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to participate in an online game.

33. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to initiate an online game.

34. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to access a restricted online resource.

35. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to participate in an online game in a way that indicates the account has member access.

36. The computer program of claim 35, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to participate in an online game with a visual cue indicating the account has member access.

37. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to participate in an online game in a way that is different from a way an account without this privilege of member access participates.

38. The computer program of claim 37, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to access one or more special resources in an online game that are not available to an account without member access.

39. The computer program of claim 37, wherein:

said member access privileges include allowing an account to access one or more special features in an online game that are not available to an account without this privilege of member access.

40. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

said first account also has members-only access, and

said members-only access provides one or more privileges different from said two or more privileges pro-

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vided by said member access and from said at least one privilege provided by said general access.

41. The computer program of claim 40, wherein:

said second account does not have members-only access when said second account is linked to said first account.

42. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

said first account also has said general access.

43. The computer program of claim 30, further comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

process a create member account request indicating said subscription;

confirm said subscription allows creating a member account; and

create said first account.

44. The computer program of claim 43, further comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

upgrade said subscription to allow creating a member account.

45. The computer program of claim 30, further comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

process a create non-member account request; and

create said second account.

46. The computer program of claim 30, further comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

process a link request indicating said first account and said second account; and

confirm said first account allows linking.

47. The computer program of claim 46, further comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

confirm said second account allows linking.

48. The computer program of claim 30, further comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

process an unlink request indicating said first account and said second account;

revoke said granted at least part of said member access from said second account; and

unlink said second account from said first account.

49. The computer program of claim 30, further comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

process a service request indicating a service having a minimum access and an account;

confirm said requesting account currently has access meeting said minimum access of said indicated service; and

provide said service.

50. The computer program of claim 49, further comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

upgrade said requesting account to have access meeting said minimum access of said indicated service.

51. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

granting said at least part of said member access includes granting less than all of said two or more privileges of said member access to said second account.

52. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

granting said at least part of said member access includes granting at least one of said two or more privileges of said member access to said second account for a limited period of time.

53. The computer program of claim 30, further comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

remove said member access from said first account while said second account is linked to said first account.

54. The computer program of claim 30, wherein:

said second account is linked to said first account indirectly through an intermediary data object.

55. The computer program of claim 54, wherein:

said intermediary data object is a pool.

56. A computer program, stored on a tangible storage medium, for use in managing network accounts, the program comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

create an account having general access;

process an upgrade request;

confirm said account is permitted to be upgraded based on said account meeting one or more requirements for having member access; and

upgrade said account to have member access.

57. A computer program, stored on a tangible storage medium, for use in linking network accounts, the program comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

create a first account having general access;

send a link invitation indicating a second account having member access;

process a link acceptance indicating said first account will be linked to said second account;

send a service request indicating a service having a minimum access requiring member access; and

access said service.

58. A computer program, stored on a tangible storage medium, for use in linking network accounts, the program comprising executable instructions that cause a computer to:

create a first account having member access;

process a link invitation indicating a second account having general access;

send a link request indicating said second account is to be linked to said first account.

59. A system for managing network accounts, comprising:

means for linking a second account having general access to a first account having member access; and

means for granting at least part of said member access to said second account while said second account is linked to said first account;

wherein said first account has a corresponding subscription,

said general access provides at least one privilege, and

said member access provides two or more privileges that are not provided by said general access.

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